



# What Difference Does It Make? The Impact of Religious Literacy on Engaged Pluralism in Service of A Just World at Peace

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What Difference Does It Make?  
The Impact of Religious Literacy on Engaged Pluralism in Service of  
A Just World at Peace

Jan Hatcher

A Thesis in the Field of Religion  
For the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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## Abstract

The field of religious studies has been increasingly emphasizing the importance of religious literacy as a means of addressing many societal and global challenges such as prejudice, discrimination, marginalization, and violence. Its advocates have made many claims about its potential positive impacts on respect and empathy, a more engaged pluralism, cross-cultural relationship building, collaborative problem solving of local and global issues, and its potential role as an important component of peace building in our communities and on the world stage. But, how do we know? In this thesis, through a bibliographic survey, I examine the field-wide claims being made in support of religious literacy in an attempt to strengthen the case for these initiatives. I also recognize the current shortcomings, namely a glaring lack of empirical evidence to support these claims. However, like others cited in this work, I do not think we should abandon these efforts because of this deficit; instead, as a collective body of religious literacy professionals we have an opportunity to build on what we currently know, craft important evaluation methods into our programming, share our findings across the field, and collaborate on achieving and empirically supporting the results we believe are possible. A format for program and evaluation design developed by the Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Program is offered as a model upon which we can build.

## Author's Biographical Sketch

When I was a young girl and becoming aware of fighting in the world, I would lie awake at night wondering what the solution could be. This desire to effect peace in the world has been with me for what feels like my whole life. As a young Christian, I wanted to be a missionary, thinking I could make a difference that way. After a graduate degree in counseling, I worked in a Christian counseling center but soon began to feel very limited by the religious and psychological constructs used for helping others.

I began to study the world's great religious traditions and felt inspired by the spiritual wisdom found in all of them. I then pursued theological studies and began teaching in the Religious Studies department at Virginia Commonwealth University, which is where I have been for over 14 years. I have designed a course with an accompanying textbook titled *The World of Religion and Spirituality: An Overview*, and in this course I focus on evolving spiritual mythology alongside evolving humankind, the emergence of organized religions and basic theological aspects of each, and current spiritual trends including mindfulness, eco-spirituality, and the compatibility of science (quantum physics, particularly) and ancient spiritual insights.

Seeing the impact this course has on students, their worldview and their increased openness and respect for those from different backgrounds than their own has motivated me to focus my work in the world on advancing religious literacy in service of more respectful and collaborative relations between people, the cultivation of healthy communities and democracies, and a world motivated to achieve peace and justice for all.

## Dedication

First, I dedicate this work to my three children, Thomas, Samuel, and Joshua. You inherited a world that was co-created in part by my generation, and those that came before me. You have many problems to address, and I hope I have helped equip you with what you will need to do your part, and the motivation to do it. And in the years I have left, I will continue to do my part in working to create the world in which we want to live, the world in which I hope you get to live.

Secondly, I dedicate this work to all children in the world. As one human family, you are all my children, and I feel a responsibility to each one of you. I believe that for most people, there is a shared vision of peace and justice in the world and of the opportunity to really flourish in life. I also believe that together, we can co-create this world, with each person doing their part, one step at a time.

And finally, I dedicate this to my parents who modeled loving kindness and a servant's heart, to my brothers who have all shown unconditional sibling love and who have challenged me to grow in different ways throughout my life, and to my spiritual teachers Jesus, Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, the Buddha, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh. And I am deeply grateful for the life and spirit of John Denver, who, when I was young, created a vision for me through his songs of a world of compassion and caretaking for all living things that inspired me to live a life in service to this vision.

## Acknowledgments

My journey from my work in the counseling field to my service to the world through the field of religious literacy began with my brother Eddie Peters - painter, poet, and spiritual guide - suggesting I read Joseph Campbell's *Power of Myth*. In one sitting, with Campbell's framework of "G-O-D" as three letters/sounds put together to refer to that which is transcendent to our language, I felt liberated. I said a prayer to this transcendence, releasing all I had been taught, and opening fully to what I would learn through what the Buddhists call "emptiness". Thank you, Eddie.

In figuring out my next steps, I met with Mark Wood, the Director of the Religious Studies program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Like me, he had at first pursued graduate studies in psychology before pursuing his Ph.D. in Religion. He said, "I learned more about human beings through the study of religion than I ever did through the study of psychology." And that launched me down this path of religious studies. Thank you, Mark.

Early in my study of world religions, I was inspired by both Dr. Cliff Edwards and Jonathan Waybright, professors of Religious Studies at VCU, and I appreciate how they continue to live the teachings of Buddhism in ways that transcend any religious label; it is a way of life for each of them rather than religion, much as it is for many practicing Buddhists throughout the world. Their depth of spiritual wisdom, gentle way of living, and emanating kindness have been a constant model and support as I have not only advanced my scholarship but also advanced in my spiritual awakening.

During my studies at Harvard, I have been very fortunate to have been taught, challenged, and inspired by many wonderful faculty members. The few who have been instrumental in advancing my work in the field of religious literacy include Diane Moore of Harvard's Divinity School, one of the main voices in the scholarly discussion of religious literacy and a model for a life committed to making a difference; Professor Payam Mohseni of Harvard's Kennedy School who taught Shi'i Islam and Politics of the Middle East and helped me to value the importance of expanding the narrative and listening to many voices; and to Francis Clooney, a true scholar and theologian who helped me keep in mind the heart of religion while crafting an intellectual project about religious literacy. My life and work have been greatly enriched by all of you, and by my entire experience at Harvard. Thank you.

And finally, I want to acknowledge my family and friends who encouraged and supported me along this journey. There were definitely sacrifices made in support of my work on this project. Thank you all.



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## Chapter I.

### Introduction

Our world is facing perhaps the most significant existential threats in the history of humankind. With the increasingly challenging effects of climate change, the threat of nuclear destruction, overpopulation and a growing scarcity of resources, political unrest, and an interconnected global population that facilitates the rapid spread of deadly viruses, the survival of our species seems tenuous at best. According to Darwin, our survival in the past has been based on our empathy for one another and our ability to cooperate and work together for the collective good. In *The Descent of Man* Darwin emphasized the importance of love and cooperation for the survival of our species ninety-five times and only mentioned the popularized survival of the fittest twice (Loye, 2014). Our current dominant cultures, however, seem more characterized by materialism, commercialism, and competition, fueling an attitude of self-centeredness and greed which we see on both individual and worldwide scales.

Finding solutions to the current existential threats is not easily fostered in such a competitive, divided world. Based on our past survival, as observed by Darwin, our future existence will be better protected through our willingness to cooperate on a global scale. Seeing beyond religious, cultural, and ideological differences to our deeper shared humanity is paramount to the type of cross-cultural relationship building that is essential in addressing these existential threats of our time. Yet, the division among different

identity groups seems to be widening, both globally and locally (Dinham & Francis, 2015).

With an increase in global migration and ensuing diversity within cultures, there is rising fundamentalism, religious nationalism, and politics of difference (Turner, 2008), causing much strain on cultural and civic cohesion (Walker et al., 2021). In the U.S., this strain is currently being felt in the form of decreased civility in the public sphere, a growing divide between identity groups, and a retreat toward echo chambers in which not only do particular views get reinforced and solidified, but alternative views get vilified. And we are not alone. We can see this cultural strain developing in uncivil and violent ways throughout the world.

There are examples, however, of people of diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds who are building bridges and working together to address shared issues impacting multiple identity groups. As religion has been identified as perhaps the most important identity marker in current times, with a documented increase in religiosity around the world along with a rise in ethnoreligious nationalism (Patterson, 2011), this essential bridge-building is made possible through increased knowledge and understanding of religions and their impact on identity, values, culture, and worldview. Also beneficial is an awareness of one's lens and bias in engaging the *other*, and during the bridge-building process, there is an opportunity not only for increased understanding of the *other* but also for the expansion of one's worldview which supports the possibility of a transformation of all involved. Efforts and initiatives in support of religious literacy may play a beneficial role in helping bridge the divide between those with religious

differences who are invested in building cross-cultural relationships in order to engage in collaborative problem-solving for the global issues of our time.

### Diversity and Pluralism

Diversity in our cultures is an ever-increasing reality and how we choose to engage with this diversity is a choice. An understanding of the landscape of religious diversity in the U.S. continues to be advanced through the work of Diana Eck and The Pluralism Project at Harvard University. In the early 1990s, Eck began studying the increasingly diverse religious landscape of the Boston area, and this inquiry scaled up fairly quickly to the scope of the ever-changing religious landscape of the entire country. Eck (2006) highlights the dynamic nature of religion, and how it “is enmeshed in economics, politics, class, race, and education” (p. 745), and emphasizes the importance of civic bridge-building in order to make very diverse societies work. Pluralism, described as an attitude of respect for differences which includes a deliberate engagement in multi-religious relationships, helps make this effective bridge-building possible (Eck, 2007).

As I will be discussing diversity and pluralism as they relate to religious literacy and cross-cultural relationship building throughout this paper, I stipulate here that even though they relate to one another, they are not the same thing. According to Seiple and Hoover (2021), diversity represents the differences that exist within society, and pluralism describes an “energetic engagement” (p. 6) with this diversity, which includes an inherent respect for all human beings regardless of religion, race, culture, or any other identity criteria. Diversity describes differences that exist in a given population of people; pluralism is a process of relationship building across these lines of difference, based on a

genuine interest in better understanding the other and leading to more respectful relationships and more effective collaboration.

This type of deep commitment to the process of cross-cultural relationships “creates a process of learning, both about the ‘other’ and ‘oneself’,” according to Eck (2007, p. 4). Greater knowledge and understanding of the world’s religions fosters a propensity to see multiple legitimate perspectives which can then support cross-cultural problem-solving and peacebuilding. In her 2006 Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion titled *Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion*, Eck stated that “...religious pluralism is not primarily about common ground,” but that it “takes the reality of difference as its starting point” (p. 745). Even though she recognizes that there is often some level of common ground, she emphasizes the importance of not glossing over the differences. Building bridges across acknowledged differences helps connect “cultures and religious worlds” (Eck, 2006, p. 772), in ways that help to stabilize and support diverse societies.

When world leaders gather together to address issues such as the climate crisis, terrorism, or the world economy, if there is more than just acceptance of differences, if there is an inherent respect and interest in understanding who other people are and why they think the way they do, there seem to be more productive efforts in collaborative problem-solving. In the U.S., which has perhaps the most religiously diverse population in the world and with over half of the population identifying as very religious (Pew, 2022), an attitude of pluralism seems very beneficial to civic cohesion and to working together to nourish and maintain a well-functioning democracy and healthy society.



## Engaged Pluralism

There are myriad lenses through which one can theorize and study pluralism, such as deep pluralism, courageous pluralism, principled pluralism, and pragmatic pluralism, to name a few (Joustra, 2020). In recent years, Chris Seiple and others at the Templeton Religion Trust (in connection with the Foreign Policy Research Institute) have posited the term “covenantal pluralism,” meaning committed engagement among different religious groups for addressing global issues, and there is a small but growing body of descendent scholarly writings which uses this term. In their article titled “A Case for Cross-cultural Religious Literacy,” Seiple and Hoover (2021) make a case for the use of “covenantal pluralism” (p. 10) grounded in Roger Williams’s seventeenth-century establishment of a “covenant of peaceable neighborhood,” a community based on freedom of conscience in Rhode Island.

Although deeply respecting the work of Seiple and others and the concept of covenantal pluralism, I find the term *covenantal* problematic, especially in the field of religious studies, in that it evokes a sense of biblical origins, connected to the Western religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The covenant of Abraham with God is understood in these three main Western religions as their common origin; but how do the Eastern traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism relate to this term? It seems like a Western-centric term. I mean no disrespect to the important contributions being made by Seiple and others, but instead, I posit that *engaged pluralism* is a more direct and inclusive term for referring to the active involvement of diverse peoples respectfully and collaboratively working together on common concerns, based on a deep understanding of one’s own values and worldview as well as those of others. I believe

*engaged pluralism* is more inclusive of eastern and western worldviews and accurately describes what Seiple and his colleagues at the Foreign Policy Research Institute are working to advance.

According to Seiple and Hoover (2021), “globalization creates or exacerbates problems” (p. 2) such as terrorism, trade wars, climate change, healthcare, and human rights violations “that can only be solved through broad-based partnership,” and it is to everyone’s benefit to find positive ways of working together. Engaged pluralism is a process for accomplishing this, where diverse state and interstate actors can effectively work together to seek solutions to common issues facing our world. As described by Eck, Seiple, and others, the open engagement with religious difference which is characteristic of pluralism is based on respect for the inherent value of the other, a desire to better understand the other’s religious beliefs, values, and worldview, and a deep commitment to building a positive relationship with the other. Through this open, transformative process, not only can one develop a deeper understanding of the *other*, but one can also become more aware of one’s own biases which create blocks to openness, understanding, and respect for the other. Becoming more aware of these biases can break down one’s barriers and can create increased interest, motivation, and ability to build better relationships with those of differing religious orientations and worldviews. Positive, collaborative cross-cultural relationships create the container for effective dialogue which is understood as essential to solving the big world issues of current times, including cultivating a more peaceful world.

## Religion as a Primary Identity Marker

A better understanding of one's own and the other's identity is an important component of engaged pluralism and cross-cultural problem-solving. As Eck and others have emphasized, identity is a multivalent construction including religion, ethnicity, gender, race, culture, and other factors. People have hybrid personalities, and it is through this complex lens that one views the world and interprets situations around them. It has been asserted by Patterson (2011) in *Politics in a Religious World* that religion is becoming the dominant marker of identity, and that "the rise in individual religiosity encourages an increase in the public expression of religion by individuals and groups worldwide" (p. 7). Here in the U.S., the largest religious identifying group is Christianity, with the second largest group as those identifying as Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR), which is actually growing the fastest (Pew, 2022). In 2021, The Pew Research Center in partnership with the John Templeton Foundation published findings from extensive research done between 2007 and 2021 in 95 countries including over 200,000 people. From this data, the collaborative Global Religious Futures Project concluded that the world overall is increasing in religiosity because of the growth rates of religious regions such as Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America (Figure 1). We can have the impression that the world is becoming less religious because economically advanced countries such as the U.S., Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and China are showing a steady decrease in religious identification. However, because of the fertility rates of religious nations, the world population overall is becoming more religious. One of the predictions of this Project is that by the year 2050, there will be roughly the same number of Christians and Muslims in the world, with Islam as the fastest-growing

religion (Pew, 2015). Here in the U.S., it is predicted that Christianity will still be the largest group, but that the SBNR group will continue to increase at a faster rate. With rapid globalization and the transnational nature of religion in the world today and resulting diversity both within societies and within religions themselves, there is a significant impact on identity. What feels like shifting sand can create a destabilizing effect that can cause one to adhere more tightly to what is familiar and feels secure, feeding into the social closure and creation of symbolic cultural boundaries mentioned earlier. The Pew Research Center also observed a trend of rising government restrictions on religion, noting that in 2020, there were 57 countries in the world with very high levels of this type of restriction on the practice of religion, at least in the public sphere (Pew, 2020).

The process of engaged pluralism, however, encourages one to become more aware of the complexity of one's own identity and to look deeply into the hybrid identity of the other, letting go of representational stereotypes influenced by politics, media, or public discourse to build engaged relationships where cooperation and collaboration are possible for working toward solutions to mutual problems. In *When Peace Is Not Enough*, Atalia Omer (2013) highlights "how hybrid identities may provide creative resources for peacebuilding, especially in ethnoreligious national conflicts where political agendas are informed by particularistic conceptions of identity" (pp. 2-3). Forging pathways through the myriad complexities of identity and diversity requires an intentional effort at a deep understanding of just what those phenomena entail.

In his work titled *Religion, Art and Visual Culture*, S. Brent Plate (2022) discusses the difference between vision and seeing, and posits that one's culturally

relevant worldview, or *field of vision*, influences what one sees. This theory is relevant to the importance of religious literacy and engaged pluralism in cross-cultural problem-solving and peace-building work. When religious *illiteracy* prevails, and one is unaware of one's own bias, the conditions exist for not seeing the complexity of the identity of the other, and one's view and interactions may be influenced by dis- or misinformation about the others' religious identity, thereby creating an obstacle to really seeing and understanding the other in a way that makes positive interaction and relationship building possible. Engaged pluralism includes a deep understanding of one's own situated worldview, or *field of vision*, as well as the desire to understand that of others. In advancing religious literacy, it is important to really see and understand a particular religion from the situated experiences and perspectives of those within that religion. It is also important to remember that even though religion may be the most important identity marker of current times, one's identity is complex and multivalent and can only be understood through an open approach to really seeing and understanding the other.

#### Through Another's Lens, Not One's Own

In his seminal work titled *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1979) brought attention to the phenomena that people in the West, specifically Europe and the U.S., have made assumptions about those from "the Orient" and created characterizations based on these assumptions which both minimize and marginalize the identities of those referred to as *Orientalists*. According to Said (1979), "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says. What he says and writes, by virtue of the

fact this it is said or written, is meant to indicate the Orientalist is outside the Orient both as an existential and as a moral fact” (pp. 20-21). *Disorientalism* refers to those from the *Orient*, particularly the Middle East, rejecting imposed identities by imperialist powers, and asserting their own identities through myriad means. In building effective cross-cultural relationships, it is important to become aware of one’s own propensity toward orientalism or toward generalizations about any group of people based on a narrative created by those outside of the group. It is important to intentionally work to understand another’s multivalent identity and worldview through the other’s lens, not one’s own, recognizing also the diversity that exists within any identity group. These generalizations are not unique to people from the West, however, and not all people from the West interpret the world through a western worldview. But Said’s work shines a light on the tendency of human beings to generalize identity groups through their own lens, or to adopt assumptions based on group identity, an important awareness to acknowledge and work to transcend when engaging in cross-cultural relationships.

An important potentiality of engaged pluralism is the possibility of transformation which can occur through respectful dialogue and engagement focused on mutual interests (Asghar-Zadeh, 2019). This transformation includes increased awareness of representational stereotypes that have become a part of the civic discourse through the process Said referred to as *orientalism* and working to understand the other’s worldview through the other’s lens, not one’s own. This deep engagement not only increases understanding of the other, aiding the “humanizing” process, but can also bring into clearer focus one’s own lens and biases. According to Asghar-Zadeh (2019), “the demanded openness (in dialogue) for the ‘religious other’ targets a comprehensive and

dynamic process of understanding and learning not only about the identity of the other but, eventually, also about that of oneself” (p. 67). Religious literacy has the potential to help reduce barriers of misunderstanding, expand and deepen one’s understanding of those with different religious worldviews than one’s own, motivate more openness to engaged pluralism, increase awareness of one’s own propensity toward generalizations, and facilitate more effective cross-cultural, collaborative engagement.

### What *IS* Religious Literacy?

For the last several decades, the concept of religious literacy has increasingly become a part of the focus of religious studies, yet there are myriad ways of understanding religious literacy. In his book *Religious Literacy - What Every American Need to Know - And Doesn't*, Stephen Prothero (2007) discusses the specific knowledge one needs to know to be literate in the world’s religions, and defines religious literacy as “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions - their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives” (p. 15).

In her work, Diane Moore (2007) expands the focus of religious literacy beyond specific knowledge to include the contextualization of religion in culture, the diverse and dynamic nature of religions, and the impact religious experience has on one’s worldview. She defines religious literacy as “the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” (p. 56). Religions arise and exist within cultural contexts that both influence and are influenced by religion. As one’s particular religion can permeate all aspects of life for an adherent, the presence of one or more religious traditions in a society can also affect and be

affected by all aspects of the culture in which it exists. The approach to religious literacy advocated by Moore acknowledges and reflects an understanding of this dynamic relationship. In her work, Moore (2014) emphasizes the importance of the following foundational understandings in an academic study of religion:

1. There is a differentiation “between the devotional expression of particular religious beliefs as normative and the nonsectarian study of religion that presumes the religious legitimacy of diverse normative claims.
2. Religions are internally diverse.
3. Religions evolve and change over time.
4. Religious influences are embedded in all dimensions of culture. (pp. 380-383)

This sets the framework for a cultural studies approach to religious literacy, according to Moore (2014), that includes the following five characteristics:

1. The method is multi- and inter-disciplinary and recognizes how political, economic, and cultural lenses are fundamentally entwined rather than discrete.
2. [A]ll knowledge claims are ‘situated ’in that they arise out of particular social/historical contexts and therefore represent particular rather than universally applicable claims.
3. [A]ll forms of inquiry are interpretations filtered through particular lenses
4. [T]he method calls for an analysis of power and powerlessness related to the subject at hand. [W]hat are the converging factors that lend social credibility and influence to some religious traditions over others and which dimensions of those traditions are interpreted as orthodox and which heretical and by whom?
5. [C]ultural norms are fluid and socially constructed even though they are often interpreted as representing uncontested absolute truths. (pp. 380-383)



In 2015, Harvard's Divinity School (HDS) established a program for advancing religious literacy called the Religious Literacy Project (RLP). Its mission was to advance "the public understanding of religion through education" (Religion & Public Life, History). Since its launch, this program has evolved to include a two-year series on Religious Literacy and the Professions (RLP), a partnership with Oxfam to advance religious literacy in humanitarian efforts, and the creation of an institute for educators on how to advance religious literacy through curriculum planning. Expanding the initiative to include the Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative, a joint program with Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, the RLP is now under the umbrella of HDS's Religion and Public Life program, which has as its mission "to strengthen the public understanding of religion across multiple sectors, toward a more creative, just, and peaceful future."

Prothero (2007) shares the story of a visiting professor from Austria who observed that American college students "are very religious...but they know next to nothing about religion" in society or about religions specifically (p. 1). Prothero asserts that because of the powerful influence of religion on both good and destructive movements in the world, religious *illiteracy* is very dangerous, emphasizing the importance of religious knowledge and understanding in our increasingly multicultural world. According to Prothero (2007), "Religious illiteracy is (more) dangerous (than cultural illiteracy) because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil" (p. 5). One only needs to look at how Christianity was co-opted by the Roman, Spanish, and British Empires to expand their realms of power and control, and how the Crusades and Spanish Inquisition were conducted in the name of

religion - actions very much in sharp contrast to the very core teachings of the religion – to understand Prothero’s statement (Newell, 2014).

Religion not only impacts individual and group identity, however; it also plays a very complex role in both civic and international affairs (Moore, 2014), and lack of knowledge and understanding of the world’s religions fuels prejudice, discrimination, bullying, and violence (Walker et al., 2021). Moore (2007) is concerned with the civic functioning of diverse societies, stating that “[k]nowledge of the basic tenets and structures of the world’s religions is essential to a functioning democracy in our increasingly pluralistic age” (p. 5). She asserts that “[s]trengthening the public understanding of religion is a critical component of efforts to minimize violence and conflict throughout the globe....” (2014, p. 379). In addition, according to Moore (2007), a well-functioning democracy in our increasingly pluralistic world is dependent on knowledge and understanding of the world’s religions. In contrast, religious *illiteracy* has led to “disastrous” foreign policy, contributing to political instability around the globe (Prodromou et al., 2018). There is increasing emphasis on the importance of religious literacy in all professional fields, for the support of civil discourse and democracy, and for helping to stabilize our world and build cross-cultural relationships which are important for addressing the serious issues of our time. According to Moore (2007), “Cultivating religious literacy...will help to deepen awareness of our diverse multiculturalism and enhance the ability to engage in responsible public discourse about matters of grave importance and urgency” (p. 88).

There is much consensus regarding the importance of religious literacy in efforts to advance human rights and peace in the world, its importance in all professional fields,

and its role in responsible and effective citizenship, but there is not one definition or approach accepted by all religious studies scholars. Based on Moore's (2014) focus on situated knowledge, reflecting her emphasis on "the importance of understanding religions and religious influences in context and as inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience" (p. 380), situated religious literacy is the lens through which I address religious literacy in this thesis.

For this thesis, I have examined the scholarly discussion addressing religious literacy and its impact on engaged pluralism, cross-cultural relationship-building, and cooperative problem-solving within our increasingly integrated, religiously diverse world. My research has included a bibliographic survey of academic scholarship which includes but is not limited to seminal works such as Said's *Orientalism*, Prothero's *Religious Literacy*, Moore's *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, Eck's *A New Religious America*, and Dinham and Francis's *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, as well as ample peer-reviewed works related to this topic. After a closer look in Chapter II at the potential role of religious literacy in supporting peacebuilding initiatives, democracy, human rights, and international relations, I will then examine in Chapter III the impact of Swami Vivekananda at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions and the emphasis on religious literacy and engaged pluralism in the work of the World's Parliament of Religions today. Through these two case studies, one historical and one current, I will consider how religious literacy and engaged pluralism seem to have made, or have the potential to make, a positive difference along the path toward the cross-cultural relationship-building and collaborative problem-solving necessary for addressing the existential crises of our time.

The final two chapters look at the deficit of empirical evidence in support of all the positive claims being made about religious literacy and then begin to build a foundation for a path forward. Results of a collaborative European effort toward creating a tool for measuring outcomes of religious knowledge initiatives as part of religious literacy, as well as a framework for building post-evaluation measurement into religious literacy programming as created by the Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Initiative, are explored.

## Chapter II.

### Religious Literacy in Support of a Just World at Peace

In John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), he posed the question: If we had no idea into what position in society we would be born, what kind of society would we create? He asserted that if we could get past our personal identities, looking more broadly than from "behind a veil of ignorance," we could better build a just society that would establish and protect equal rights for all. In examining the scholarly work related to religious literacy, pluralism, and cross-cultural problem-solving, a common civic and global vision emerged consistent with Rawls' conviction that "what is right for one is right for another" (Mullan, 1998). Many scholars in the field of religious studies and international relations share a vision of societies valuing diverse peoples and uniting in civic solidarity, rather than advantaging any one dominant group over others, while providing constitutional protection of equal rights for all people, regardless of identity factors. In Diane Moore's book *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy* (2007), she quotes the Constitution: "...all humans are created equal and deserve to be afforded fundamental respect, dignity, and the conditions that will enable the flourishing of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (p. 10). This declaration addresses the government's role in helping to create and protect conditions for human flourishing. The Master of Religion and Public Life degree program at Harvard's Divinity School, a program that Moore helped create and continues to guide, succinctly sums up its mission as follows: "At its core, Religion

and Public Life is about enhancing the public understanding of religion in the service of building a just world at peace” (RPL, *What We Do*, para. 1).

Contrary to expectations during the rise of secularism in the 20th century that religion in the world was waning, the world seems to have turned even more passionately toward religion as an identity marker in recent decades (Pew, 2015, 2018). According to Turner (2008), “Religious life in the twenty-first century has taken on a renewed vitality that was unexpected and which many fear threatens cohesion and civil society” (p. 13). Societal conditions causing increased immigration, the growth of global business interactions, shared existential threats requiring global collaboration, and the immediate connection and exchange of ideas made possible through the world wide web are growing phenomena bringing people of diverse religious and cultural world views into direct relationship with one another. As Eck has said, “Muslims and Hindus are no longer far away in Pakistan and India, but next door, in Boston and Des Moines” (as cited in Dinham & Francis, 2015, p. 64).

In his work, Turner (2008) emphasized that the current international migration is creating greater religious diversity and greater cultural complexities and that this globalization of world religions is creating increased religious tensions, issues of tolerance, and new challenges to civil and political structures. There is a rise in religious nationalism and a constriction of religious freedoms happening worldwide. According to Turner (2008), in “culturally diverse societies, social groups will employ strategies of social closure to secure access to resources against outsiders who are seen to be competitors” (p. 7). In her book *Why the West Fears Islam*, Cesari (1979) echoed this phenomenon and discussed how societies create “symbolic boundaries” (p. xvi) that

determine whether a particular religion or culture is included or excluded from society. For example, Said (1979) used the example of the Arab Palestinian in the U.S. in the following description:

There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental. The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny. (p. 27)

Yet, the equal rights that Rawls, Moore, and others have understood as foundational to a healthy society and peaceful world ensure the freedom to practice and express religious differences without experiencing prejudice, marginalization, exclusion, or violence. So, how are societies to provide a countervailing approach to dealing with growing religious diversity and the tendency toward ethno-religious nationalism, social closure, discrimination, and violence? The answer may lie in a combination of religious literacy and engaged pluralism. To better understand the potential of this combined approach, however, a closer look at religious illiteracy and forms of violence is important.

### Religious Illiteracy and Forms of Violence

The dangers of religious illiteracy are visible all around us. Prejudice, hatred, fear, marginalization, and violence are all evident in our multicultural societies. In her work, Cesari (2013) discussed the cultural bias against Islam in the West, and “people’s incapacity to see the reality of Muslims with respect and sympathetic imagination” (p. xiv). She described the vulnerability of Muslims in the West to become the internal and external enemy and she demonstrated how much of Western cultural discourse, political

rhetoric, and media have unified Islam into one narrative which helps to justify both symbolic boundaries and the more overt exclusion of some Muslims from Western societies. Of course, we can look at many places in the world including China and Myanmar, not just the West, where this is happening today.

There are those who use religion to advance their own power agendas or other non-benevolent goals, and as John Philip Newell (2014) pointed out, religion has a history of being co-opted and used for empire-building. When a narrative is presented for political or personal agendas, a religiously illiterate public is more vulnerable to buying into that narrative, which often portrays misinformation. According to Moore (2014), “there are many commonly held assumptions about religion in general and religious traditions in particular that represent fundamental misunderstandings” (p. 380). In addition, after 9/11, prejudice against Muslims in the U.S. was generalized to include anyone who looked Middle Eastern or wore a head covering. For example, the wearing of turbans by Sikhs has made them as a faith group more vulnerable to being viewed outside of symbolic cultural boundaries in the U.S. As the country’s first Sikh state attorney general and the Director of Enforcement for the Security and Exchange Commission, Gurbir Grewal has had to navigate this lack of understanding of his faith as he has worked to overcome the prejudice and bias in the very country he represents. In a *Wall Street Journal* article published in 2021 by Dave Michaels, Grewal reported that he “found his calling” to work *for* the United States “after Sept. 11, 2001, when hundreds of Sikh Americans were victims of racial profiling and violent attacks committed by people who said they were taking revenge over the terrorist attacks,” which had nothing to do with them as a faith group (p. A4). Rawls highlighted an even more grim reality, citing



the danger “when the grounds of intolerance are themselves a matter of faith” (Mullan, 1998, p. 314), as evidenced by increasing religious nationalism and oppression of minority groups by the religious majority in countries around the world. According to Reverend High Priestess Phyllis Curott, a Program Chair with the Parliament of the World’s Religions which will be a focus of Chapter III, we are at an important turning point in history related to the role of religious leaders in affecting conditions of violence or peace. She says:

Today we are all standing at a pivotal moment where history seeks to repeat itself. It is a moment of urgency – an existential global scourge has returned...It is a stark reality that transcends borders, cultures and faiths. A reality that demands our collective action and moral courage. As people of faith and spirit we have a singular responsibility. Here is the truth we must all confront and change. Despots are misappropriating religions to justify the unjustifiable. Tyrants proclaim themselves saviors posturing with religious symbols and exploiting language to affirm their power. And tragically, there are religious leaders who stand beside them and religious communities who cheer them. (PoWR, *Our 2023 Convening*, para. 3)

### Galtung’s Typology of Violence and Peace

The complexity of conditions supporting violence is more clearly understood through a close look at Galtung’s work in the field of Peace Studies. In his theoretical framework, Galtung (1990) offered a model for understanding violence and peace conceptualized as a triangle with sides representing direct, structural, and cultural violence or peace. In this model, each arm of the triangle influences and supports the others.

#### Direct Violence

Direct violence is understood as anything that threatens life or another’s capacity to meet basic human needs such as survival needs (leading to poor health,

mortality/death), well-being needs (leading to misery and morbidity), identity-meaning needs (leading to alienation and/or spiritual crisis), or freedom needs (leading to oppression, lack of liberty, and servitude). Direct violence is usually a specific action or practice.

### Structural Violence

According to Galtung's model, *structural violence* is the systematic process by which certain groups are denied access or are marginalized through such means as legal structures or accepted practices. Through direct and structural violence, a group (usually a minority group) can be de-socialized from their own culture and re-socialized into another and forced to express the dominant culture.

### Cultural Violence

Cultural violence includes prominent social norms and attitudes, like widely accepted prejudice that can make direct or structural violence seem natural or acceptable and include any aspect of culture used to legitimize violence. The cultural violence of prejudice, for example, can support the structural violence of discrimination and racial bias and also support the direct violence of physically harming someone or denying someone basic needs for survival, such as access to medical care or healthy food. Direct and structural violence, in turn, influence cultural violence.

### Forms of Violence as Mutually Reinforcing

In this typology of violence and peace, Galtung (1990) described the mutually reinforcing existence of direct, structural, and cultural dimensions of violence and peace.

Attitudes of prejudice and hatred, fueled by myopic narratives and social discourse related to a particular religion, fall under cultural violence. These attitudes can be greatly fueled by religious illiteracy. Uninformed or misinformed understandings of the *other* support symbolic boundaries and exclusion of minority religious groups from society, and in some cases, encourage or foster acts of direct violence against individuals who identify with those particular religious groups. According to Moore, Prothero, and others, expanding one's field of vision through greater knowledge and understanding of different religions can help break down this triangle of violence in society, and in turn, help to build and fortify a triangle of peace.

#### Religious Literacy in Support of a Healthy Democracy

Moore and others have pointed out the irony of religious *illiteracy* in a country as diverse as the United States. Religious literacy, according to Moore (2007), is important for understanding culture and history, for supporting and advancing a healthy democracy “in our increasingly pluralistic age” (p. 5), and for helping us examine more closely and evaluate our own religious orientations. In their work, Walker et al. (2021) pointed out that in the United States, if Christianity is broken down into its disparate groups, no one religious group represents more than half of the population, and they emphasize “the urgency for us to prepare the next generation to do what no previous generation has done - to self-govern a nation of religious minorities” (p. 5). They also stressed that “religious literacy is more than knowing facts or trivia about religion – it is a fundamental civic competency” (p. 1). As already noted, however, religious literacy is relational and significantly impacts the conditions important to engaged pluralism, which “offers the

best opportunity for diverse faiths to coexist without violence while supporting the civic conditions of common governance” (Seiple & Hoover, 2021, p. 7).

### Religious Literacy for More Effective International Relations

The shortcomings of religious illiteracy are also well-documented in international relations and politics. Patterson (2011) has asserted that religion is a major factor in global affairs, and that “[a] religiously illiterate foreign policy can be myopic, naive, and at times, offensive” (p. x). In the West, for example, there is an orientation toward the separation of church and state. However, in other religious cultures, particularly Islam, this is not the case. Interacting with Muslim actors in global affairs with the assumption that church and state *should* be separate and the assumption that supremacy of religion over civil structures is less civilized than the Western way is another form of Said’s *orientalism* (2017). The “U.S. foreign policy must engage with the world as it is, including its vibrant religiosity,” stated Patterson (2011), and “the U.S. must develop a basic religious literacy in its foreign policy establishment and tap into the uniquely American reserves of religious capital in its society” (p. 11).

In his work, Patterson (2011) described how religious literacy in foreign affairs can greatly enhance the ability to understand the multi-dimensionality of many of the world’s current conflicts, with important implications for efforts toward peacebuilding, and Moore (2022) emphasized the importance of understanding the power of religion in human experience to better understand contemporary global affairs. In addition, Rosen (2023) has emphasized the importance of religious literacy in inter-religious diplomacy and peacebuilding, asserting that “the need for religious literacy...is a necessity among policymakers, civil society practitioners, and just about anyone interested in effectively

partnering with religious communities and organizations” (p. 255). Marshall et al. (2021) have supported this strategic religious engagement (SRE) in asserting that SRE “should be a key element in building an overall country or regional strategic plan and it should inform stakeholder mapping engagement, and collaboration in any given context” (p. 63). Engaged pluralism in international relations is essential to success in achieving goals of diplomacy and peace building and can be enhanced through knowledge and understanding gained through religious literacy.

Much of the world is religious, and for many countries where international relations are strained, religious difference is a part of the challenge in building and fostering positive relationships. According to Rosen (2023), “Crafting a peace accord is still the purview of the political leadership, but without the support of religious people in the region, no agreement will pass muster” (p. 259).

### Religious Literacy for Advancing the Opportunity for Peace

In this chapter, I have further built the case for religious literacy in support of engaged pluralism aimed at strengthening civic cohesion, decreasing prejudice and violence, creating positive cross-cultural relationships, helping to address global issues, and advancing peace in our communities and in the larger world. Moore, Prothero, and other scholars have emphasized the urgency of the need for a deliberate prioritization of religious literacy. Building on the foundation laid by Moore and Prothero, current scholarship emphasizes the importance of contextualized religious literacy, understanding the way a particular religion is understood, experienced, and practiced within a particular religious community, how religion informs the changing nature of culture, and how culture impacts the dynamic nature of religion.

Walker et al. (2021) also emphasized the importance of religious literacy in the protection of human rights around the world, the reality of global citizenship, and in advancing the common good for all people. They have also asserted that “education is not the only field responsible for promoting religious literacy – it is the civic duty of every profession to cultivate the public understanding of religion” (p. 2). According to Seiple and Hoover (2021), “[c]ross-cultural religious literacy demands that one be reflective about one’s philosophy/theology of the other, toward practical and positive engagement in a multi-faith, globalizing world that will require multi-faith partners to serve the common good” (p. 8). Advocacy for religious literacy is not just confined to the Academy, however, but is also getting more attention in theological studies. As a theologian, Francis X. Clooney SJ (2013) of Harvard’s Divinity School has advocated for paying closer attention to religious diversity within theological studies, suggesting that comparative theology is important in understanding contemporary faith. Clooney (2013) said, “Encountering other religions in far-off parts of the world is now balanced by the inevitability of such encounters close to home, everywhere in the United States and right where we live, study, and teach. The context for theological education today is this growing religious diversity” (p. 323). Patterson (2011) has added: “Attention to diversity has to do not just with pluralism in general, but with specific attention to other (religious) traditions and what we learn from them” (p. 324).

### Chapter III.

#### Religious Literacy in Practice

I have chosen to look at Swami Vivekananda who, though not invited, traveled from India to Chicago in 1893 to the World's Parliament of Religions because he saw an opportunity to represent the religion of India on a stage with representatives from around the world. He had experienced a true spiritual awakening in his relationship with guru Ramakrishna, and not only gained a new understanding of the spiritual insights of the Upanishads but also understood the damage done to the Indian identity because of the Christian missions in India (Harris, 2022). Conversely, he understood the Western, and specifically the Christian worldview *because* of the Christian missions and his time at Western educational institutions in Calcutta. He had at least a basic understanding of the faith and practices of the religion of Christianity which gave him the language and the reference points to get the attention of the Christian organizers and participants. His passion for his own religion as well as his familiarity with Christian language and thought, the orientation of the majority of those attending the Parliament, supported a style of rhetoric that caused people to listen as he validated Hinduism as an ancient and legitimate universal religion rivaling Christianity. Vivekananda not only had an impact on the growing attitude of pluralism in the U.S., but he also stirred interest in religions of the East, especially his Vedanta form of Hinduism, a philosophical approach to Hinduism which he seemed to believe superior to other forms.

## Swami Vivekananda and the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions

Chapter III begins with an overview of the role of Swami Vivekananda at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions (Parliament), where he is credited with advancing religious pluralism in the American and global landscapes through his use of religiously-literate strategic rhetoric to convey his understanding of other world religions and world views before asserting his own worldview (Block, 2008; Seager, 1993, 1995; Stroud, 2018). I then discuss the effects of Vivekananda's educational background and life experiences on his level of religious literacy and the influence of his Hindu identity and knowledge on his attitude and approach to engaged pluralism at the 1893 Parliament. Finally, based on this research, I support claims as to the impact Vivekananda's presence at the Parliament had on the rise of pluralism as the predominate attitude toward religion in the U.S. as well as on advancing religious literacy initiatives and the subsequent rise of the study of world religions in the Academy (Ziolowski, 1993).

I will examine the Parliament of the World's Religions (PoWR) today and their programs aimed at building strong interfaith relationships among religious and non-religious leaders and communities from around the world, in service of finding solutions to significant global issues of current times. Over a century later and after some ebb and flow of momentum, the PoWR appears to be re-energized in its work toward engaged pluralism, cross-cultural relationship building, and advancing a global ethic for a more peaceful world while emphasizing the importance of religious literacy to these efforts. I have chosen these two case studies because of the 1893 Parliament's influence on pluralism in the U.S. and the global interfaith community, and the far-reaching vision of the current PoWR in advancing religious knowledge and understanding, respectful



engagement across deep differences, and committed cross-cultural relationships in addressing both the local and global issues threatening our world.

In 1893 at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda effectively demonstrated a path to humanizing the "other" as he deftly advanced respect for Hindus and other non-Christians at the predominantly Christian event. During the course of this event, Vivekananda eloquently communicated his respect for other religions while also validating Hinduism as a world religion (Block, 2008; Seager, 1993, 1995). Vivekananda's knowledge and understanding of world religions, especially Christianity, his understanding of the Western worldview, and his strategic rhetoric helped advance pluralism as the predominant attitude toward religion in the U.S. as well as other parts of the world (Stroud, 2018; Ziokowski, 1993). After this event, the idea of pluralism took deeper root and the awareness of the value of understanding other religions advanced the academic study of religion in many universities.

### The Opportunity

At the 1893 Parliament, delegates from all over the world gathered in Chicago to share their religions with one another for what Max Muller described as an event which "stands unique, stands unprecedented in the whole history of the world" (p. 55). According to Zubovich (2018), "For many Americans, it was their first encounter with Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and other people of non-Christian faith" (para.1). The World's Parliament of Religions (Parliament), as it was called, was part of the larger Columbian Exposition which put on display the material and technological advances of the Western world. According to Seager (1993), Charles Bonney, a Chicago

lawyer and the President of the Exposition, envisioned Parliament as a loftier, spiritual counterpart to the grandiose materialism of the Expo (p. 48).

The aim of Parliament, according to Bonney, was “to unite all Religion against all irreligion” in a world perceived as moving away from religious beliefs and behaviors in favor of science and secularism (Barrows, 1893, I, p. 72). In his welcome to Parliament, Bonney continued with the following:

This day the sun of a new era of religious peace and progress rises over the world, dispelling the dark clouds of sectarian strife. This day a new flower blooms in the gardens of religious thought, filling the air with its exquisite perfume. This day a new fraternity is born into the world of religious progress, to aid the upbuilding of the kingdom of God in the hearts of men. (p. 72)

Appointed by Bonney as the Chairman of the Parliament, John Henry Barrows, a liberal Presbyterian minister in Chicago, shared in the lofty goals for the global gathering of religious delegates representing the great religions from around the world - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Seager, 1993, p. 15). The mission statement for Parliament, according to Seager (1993) in *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter*, Chicago, 1893, was

to set forth an accurate and authoritative account of the present condition and outlook of Religion among the leading nations of the world, and to promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious men of diverse faith . . . while not striving to achieve formal and outward unity. (p. 48)

Beneath Barrows' enthusiasm for universal brotherhood, however, many believe there was a more implicit goal. According to Richards (2018) in her article on the Parliament, “Its true purpose was to highlight the supremacy of Protestant Christianity” (p. 49). In organizing the seventeen days, with 216 addresses to be given - sixteen on

Buddhism, thirteen on Hinduism, eleven on Judaism, several on each of the others, and the majority presented by Christians - Barrows orchestrated the presentations to highlight Christianity as the more evolved universal religion for all (Seager, 1995, p. 50).

According to Seager (1995), “In (his) opening address from the Parliament, Barrows welcomes the ‘wise men of the East ’in the spirit of ‘divine Fatherhood and human brotherhood.’ But he does so on liberal Protestant terms” (p. 57).

The most influential of these “wise men of the East” was Swami Vivekananda, whom some say “stole the show” at Parliament (Seager, p. 42). His engaging style, laced with compassion and conviction, established respect for all religions while he was also extolling the merits of his own. Vivekananda as a Weberian “religious virtuoso” is believed to have effectively influenced the establishment of pluralism as the predominant attitude toward religion during the Parliament, rather than the exclusivism or limited inclusivity exhibited by its Christian organizers. Through a close examination of his historical background, the following demonstrates how he advanced pluralism at the Parliament through his Opening Address, Speech on Hinduism, and Closing Remarks, and how his approach to pluralism was rooted in his own level of religious knowledge of Hinduism, Christianity and others, and the ways by which he influenced the attitude of other participants toward engaged pluralism.

#### The Development of Swami Vivekananda as a Religious Virtuoso

The arc of Vivekananda’s life before the World’s Parliament followed a course consistent with Max Weber’s description of the making of a “religious virtuoso.”

According to Herling (2016), Weber’s theory of religion asserted that “while the basic drive for power, status, and wealth may rule over human history, ‘ideas ’or ‘worldviews ’

that come from religion do have the capacity to push it in a different direction” (p. 72). Vivekananda’s experience with Hinduism did just that. The son of socio-economically affluent parents, Vivekananda grew up financially comfortable, well-educated, and exposed to many activities which helped him develop into a confident young man. His professional goals, says Thomas (1930), were “to be a great orating lawyer, with power and wealth and influence over men” (p. 66). Because of Christian missions in India, his life was significantly impacted by their modernizing influences. Attending a Scottish Christian university, Presidency College in Calcutta, Vivekananda was not only very fluent in the English language, writes Stroud (2018), but also knew enough of the Christian language and worldview so that he could speak with references and images to which many Christians could relate, thereby engaging interest in what he had to say (p. 253).

A change in life circumstances, argues Thomas (1930), greatly altered Vivekananda’s path through life. After his father died, his family struggled financially and even though Vivekananda had a college degree, he could not find employment (p. 67). After struggling to secure basic sustenance, Vivekananda became a disciple of Ramakrishna, a mystical Hindu guru. According to Thomas and others, writes Herling (2016), Vivekananda inadvertently touched Ramakrishna's foot, at which instant he had a spiritual breakthrough to a great enlightened understanding of the divine nature of God and Self, a type of mystical experience which is an essential ingredient of Weber’s “religious virtuoso” (p. 72). Before dying, says Kittlestrom (2009), Ramakrishna shared with Vivekananda his vision that he would spread the mystical teachings of Hinduism to the West (p. 263). After his guru’s death, Vivekananda became the spiritual leader of the

group of Ramakrishna's followers, and they established a monastery. A few years later, Vivekananda withdrew from this order and went out on his own. Thomas (1930) tells us that he traveled to other parts of India, where his reputation as a great spiritual teacher was growing, and it was suggested to him that he travel to Chicago for the 1893 event, representing the religious ideals of Vedanta to the world (p. 73). In 1892, Vivekananda boarded a ship bound for North America.

Arriving in Chicago well in advance of Parliament's Opening, Vivekananda realized that he did not have the needed permission to attend the event as those invited were delegate representatives of their faith traditions. His powerful charisma, another virtuosic aspect of his character, helped open this door as the first of many doors opened to him during his time in America (Herling, 2016). While on a train, he met and impressed an educated and wealthy woman from Boston who introduced him to the right people to secure his place in the Parliament. On the first day of the World's Parliament, as delegates were giving their opening addresses, Vivekananda deferred to others, waiting and listening, until late in the day when he eloquently gave an unrehearsed talk which, when he began with "Sisters and Brothers of America," was met with enthusiastic applause (Barrows, 1893, I, p. 101). His Opening Speech continued as follows:

It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world, I thank you in the name of the mother of religions, and I thank you in the name of the millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.

My thanks also, to some of the speakers on this platform who have told you that these men from far-off nations may well claim the honor of bearing to the different lands the idea of toleration. I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions to be true. I am proud to tell you that I belong to a religion into whose sacred language, the Sanskrit, the word exclusion is untranslatable.

I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the Earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, a remnant which came to southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy Temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings. As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, oh Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various, though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to thee’.

The present Convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita. ‘Whosoever comes to me, through whatsoever form I reach him, they are all struggling through paths that in the end always lead to me’. Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendent, fanaticism, have possessed long this beautiful earth. It has filled the Earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for this horrible demon, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But its time has come, and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this Convention may be the death knell to all fanaticism, to all persecutions with the sword or the pen, and to all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal. (pp. 101-102)

On this very first day, Vivekananda established himself as a Weberian religious virtuoso, a charismatic representative of Vedantic Hinduism and its universal principles who would effectively alter the course and outcome of this historic event as well as the future of pluralism (and Vedanta) in America. In *Swami Vivekananda’s Vedantic Cosmopolitanism*, Swami Medhananda (2022) stated, “...one of Vivekananda’s primary aims was to educate Americans about the Hindu religion, removing misconceptions about it and highlighting the religious tolerance and acceptance of Hindus” (p. 97). In the speeches given by Vivekananda at the Parliament, he built a case that Hinduism contains the essential elements of a pluralistic religion that could be universal, while

simultaneously affirming the value of all religions represented there. According to Richards (2018): “Vivekananda, whose adopted religious name means, roughly, ‘joyful conscience’, was widely regarded as the most influential and popular of all the speakers to address the Parliament” (p. 45).

### Advancing Pluralism at the Parliament

In his opening address, Vivekananda set a pluralistic tone which he would only strengthen in the following days. After the initial applause and his establishment of the ancient religion of Hinduism, with millions of adherents, as a valid world religion. Vivekananda added support from the Bhagavad Gita and then quoted Lord Krishna “Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form I reach him; they are all struggling through paths that in the end always lead to me” (Richards, 2018, p. 102). Vivekananda not only validated Hinduism for a primarily Western audience, but he also strategically laid the groundwork for countering the assumed supremacy of Christianity by the organizers and many participants at the Parliament, while advancing pluralism as what he believed to be a more valid approach. In their article on Asian religions in the United States, Richardson and Stein (2000) asserted that Vivekananda’s “charisma and warmth” created an openness to his message of tolerance and mutual understanding. Richards (2018) stated that he also “took another tact, attempting to hold a mirror up to his audience, asking them to see themselves in a different way” (p. 420). The benefits of this type of self-reflection for religious leaders at the Parliament, with the potential of a greater awareness of one’s own biases based on inadequately informed narratives, is consistent with what many scholars have noted related to the increased self-awareness that can occur through the process of engaged pluralism. Vivekananda seemed to have

come to the U.S. at the right time, as attitudes toward religion were already changing from a predominantly Protestant superiority to one expanded to include at least Catholicism and Judaism. With the right persuasion, opening further to include religions from the Orient was not a giant leap.

In his address on Hinduism on the ninth day of the Parliament assembly, Vivekananda asserted that each religion is a result of different cultural understandings of the nature of ultimate reality, or “God”, and that some paths are closer to the Truth than others, but all paths are human attempts to understand the Infinite. He said:

To the Hindu, man is not traveling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth...Unity in variety is the plan of nature, and the Hindu has recognized it. Every other religion lays down a certain amount of fixed dogma and tries to force the whole society through it. (Barrows, 1893, II, p. 976)

According to Stroud (2018), “It was Vivekananda’s pluralism that enabled a successful sort of argumentative engagement with other faiths” (p. 253). Through his Opening Address and his address on Hinduism, Vivekananda advocated for pluralism as the more appropriate universal approach to the religious landscape of the world, with overt comparisons of Hinduism and Christianity in light of Vedanta.

### Hindu Identity as a Foundation for Engaged Pluralism

Before his address on Hinduism, Vivekananda had already established the validity of Hinduism as a universal religion well established over thousands of years. In his Opening Address, he said, “I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world, I thank you in the name of the mother of religions, and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects” (Barrows, 1893, I, p.102). According to Seager (1993), this rhetoric cleverly communicated that Hinduism



was the oldest religion in the world, that it had survived the development of many sects, and that it had millions of adherents; this strategic rhetoric helped establish the validity of this Eastern religion for many Westerners who had not been knowledgeable of Hinduism before. After establishing its legitimacy as a world religion for many at the Parliament, Vivekananda then had a captive audience for teaching about the ideals of Vedantic Hinduism and its place as a universal religion (Stroud, 2018).

In his address on Hinduism, Vivekananda validated all religions, but then asked, “Where is the common center to which all these widely diverging radii converge? Where is the common basis upon which all these seemingly hopeless contradictions rest?” (Barrows, 1893, II, p. 968). Vivekananda added, “all...religions, from the lowest fetishism to highest absolutism, [represent the] many attempts of the human soul to...realize the infinite...Vivekananda thus used his cultural breadth to compare Christianity and Vedanta by placing them side by side” (Harris, 2022, p. 135).

His impassioned discourse on the central tenets of Vedanta, the more philosophical and from Vivekananda’s perspective the more advanced school of Hinduism and the basis for his understanding of pluralism, included the following:

- 1.Eternal Spiritual Truth - Ultimate Truth is not dependent on anything material, including books, temples/churches/mosques, or even people
- 2.Divine Nature of Ultimate Reality, Brahman/ God - beginning-less, endless, transcendent and immanent, the essence of all things
- 3.Divine Nature of Self - the essence of Self IS Brahman/God; all people have divine nature, therefore should be treated as such
- 4.Material Illusion and Eternal Reality - the temporal physical world, including the physical body, is illusory, finite, and of secondary concern; ultimate Sacred Reality is infinite, eternal, and of primary concern

5. Paths to Union with Ultimate Reality, Brahman/God - there are many paths; in Hinduism they are the yogas (knowledge, devotion, action/good works, meditation)

6. Universal Consciousness - all things are interconnected in the spiritual realm; perceived separateness is part of the illusion

7. Importance of Images for Brahman/God - gods/goddesses and other images are only pathways or supports for one's realization of Brahman/God; not "idols"

8. Hinduism's Relationship to Other Religions - all religions are valid pathways to God; there is no need to try to convert another into one's own religion (Barrows, 1893, II, pp. 968-978).

Toward the end of this discourse, Vivekananda answered his earlier questions regarding the common center and the common basis of contradictions, saying, "The whole world is only a traveling, a coming up, of different men and women, through various conditions and circumstances, to the same goal...The contradictions come from the same truth adapting itself to the different circumstances of different natures" (Barrows, 1893, II, p. 977). He once again emphasized a pluralistic approach to the different religions of the world, while also illustrating the universal nature of Vedanta. According to Stroud (2018), Vivekananda "pushed to persuade individuals from other cultures to adopt his pluralistic reading of Hinduism" (p. 253).

Not only did Vivekananda advance pluralism and religious knowledge at the Parliament (Richardson, 2000), but he also began the process of *disorientalism* for Hindus and others from the East. He led the charge against colonial rule and Christian missions in the East, highlighting the continued oppression of the Hindu people in India since colonization. Even though he had his criticisms of traditional Hindu philosophy and advocated for the Vedanta view of the oneness of sacred reality rather than focusing on a plethora of representations in the gods and goddesses, he called out Christianity for its

claims against Hinduism's polytheism and idol worship as evidence of their lack of understanding of the religion or the people. Thomas (1930) reported: "he (Vivekananda) sneered at Christian missionaries for wanting to help Hindus by spiritual teaching" (p. 74). He quoted Vivekananda as saying, "If they want to help our people, why don't they send them something to save their starving bodies?" (p. 74). Vivekananda did not speak of the hospitals that were a part of Christian missions in India, and it is not clear whether he was unfamiliar with such missions or if this omission was part of his strategy for persuasion. Vivekananda called for a universal religion with no place for persecution or intolerance, where there was recognition of the divinity of all people. In her article, Prabhakar (2017) stated: "Vivekananda's spiritual individualism and universalism, combined with his constant call for social justice, fit in well with cosmopolitan global ethics...Vivekananda emphasizes unity in diversity" (p. 119). Other delegates from Asian countries joined in, creating a chorus of voices speaking against the attitude of Christian supremacy created by Christian missions in their countries.

#### Closing Address: Engaged Pluralism in Practice

In the Closing Address, according to Barrows (1893, II, pp. 938 – 939), Vivekananda made a final declaration of the pluralistic nature of religion in the world, with a metaphor of different seeds growing into different types of plants, according to the law of nature. His address is as follows:

The World's Parliament of Religions has become an accomplished fact, and the merciful Father has helped those who labored to bring it into existence and crowned with success their most unselfish labor.

My thanks to those noble souls whose large hearts and love of truth first dreamed this wonderful dream and then realized it. My thanks to the shower of liberal sentiments that has overflowed this platform. My thanks

to this enlightened audience for their uniform kindness to me and for their appreciation of every thought that tends to smooth the friction of religions. A few jarring notes were heard from time to time in this harmony. My special thanks to them, for they have, by their striking contrast, made the general harmony the sweeter.

Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But if anyone here hopes that this unity would come by the triumph of any one of these religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, 'Brother, yours is an impossible hope'. Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid.

The seed is put in the ground and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant; it develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth and the water, converts them into plant substance and grows a plant.

Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the others and yet preserve its individuality and grow according to its own law of growth.

If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.

In the face of this evidence if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion would soon be written, in spite of their resistance: 'Help, and Not Fight, 'Assimilation, and Not Destruction, 'Harmony, and Peace, and Not Dissension' (pp. 938-939).

#### After Parliament

After the Parliament concluded, prompted by his seeming success during the convening and the warmth with which many welcomed him and his pluralistic worldview, Vivekananda stayed in the U.S., founded the Vedanta Society, and traveled throughout the country teaching Vedantic Hindu philosophy and meditation practice to

Americans (Seager, 1993). Ironically, after the Parliament, Barrows visited India and became fairly outspoken in his criticism of Hinduism. In his Morse Lectures, Barrows (1898) said:

The Christianity which India needs and which the Western world, in all its divisions accepts, centres in the life, teachings, character of Jesus Christ, as portrayed in the Gospels...it was my effort to remove the thoughts of my hearers so far as possible from things extraneous, and things secondary, and to concentrate their minds on what is vital and essential...I endeavored to show...that Christianity...was evidently adapted to all men's needs and would become universal. (p. 28)

This was, perhaps, a more overt expression of the covert intentions of Parliament.

Upon his return to India, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission to advance Vedanta in the West as well as in India, but also to inspire a rejuvenation of the nation of India. Sister Christine (Greenstidel), an American convert to Hinduism and member of the Ramakrishna Mission, emphasized Vivekananda's charisma in her "Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda," saying that the first lecture of his that she heard "would change the whole course of my life...the power (that) emanated from him, it was overwhelming...On the wings of inspiration, he carried us to the height which was his natural abode" (Tweed & Prothero, 1999, p. 145). On one level, it seems ironic that Vivekananda was speaking out against Christian missions while at the same time establishing a mission society for Hinduism. Yet, the aim of Christian missions was to convert others to Christianity, while the aim of Hindu missions was to introduce others to the universal principles of Hinduism within the context of their own traditional religions, as emphasized in Vivekananda's closing address to Parliament.

## The Influence of Vivekananda

Weber defined a “religious virtuoso” as one who has a deep understanding of religious principles, a personal experience of transcendence, and the charisma to attract others to their teaching (Herling, 2016, p. 73). Vivekananda had such an appeal. He was described by many as a spiritual force - intelligent, eloquent, and charming, with a powerful charisma that attracted many to his message. In his article, Swami Narasimhananda (2019) described Vivekananda this way: “Vivekananda’s spirituality was not modest or meek; it was forceful, polemical, and proud. He sees the Parliament as a major step in the ...direction of the development of an audience for universal spirituality” (p. 33). To a great extent, his childhood experiences led to his discipleship with Ramakrishna, which provided him the mystical experience of union with the Divine which fueled his passion for teaching others and in spreading Hindu philosophy, especially Vedanta, to the West. However, it was his exposure to and understanding of the Western worldview obtained *because* of Western colonization, his fluent English and familiarity with Christian scripture because of Christian missions, and his basic literacy of world religions obtained from his education and curiosity that positioned him to be so effective.

Ironically, the very presence of Christian missions and colonization in India contributed to Vivekananda’s success at the Parliament, which at least somewhat altered the course of the assembly away from the Christian organizers’ intentions. As reported in the Indian Mirror in 1894, albeit a potentially biased source, Vivekananda was “beyond question the most popular and influential man in the Parliament” (Seager, 1993, p. 35). Bonney and Barrows seemed to underestimate or be unaware of the rising tide of

pluralism. In *Guru to the World*, Harris (2022) noted, “For the organizers, the aim was to show that religion could unite rather than divide, although this apparent universalism ignored the reality of great power rivalry and the role of Christian mission in underpinning imperialism” (p. 122). This reality was understood and felt by Vivekananda and others at the Parliament. As demonstrated, instead of unifying and advancing Christianity toward its acceptance as *the* universal religion, as was their hope, much interest was generated at the Parliament in Hinduism and other Eastern religious traditions. According to Seager (1995), “Having failed as a liberal quest for religious unity, the Parliament unintentionally turned out to be a relegation of the plurality of forces on the American and world scenes” (p. xxxix). Pluralism was on its way to becoming the predominant attitude toward religion in America and interest in establishing religious studies programs at American universities greatly increased, and the religious virtuoso Swami Vivekananda was instrumental in making it so.

### The Parliament of World Religions Today

The legacy of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions goes beyond its influence on pluralism and religious literacy in the United States and other nations with representatives attending this unprecedented convening. Its story and impact have made its way into much scholarly work, particularly focused on the progressive vision for the event of Charles Bonney and John Henry Barrows, the incredible interfaith convening of religious leaders from around the world over 100 years ago, and the role of Swami Vivekananda from India who emerged as one of the persons of charisma at the event. He had an impact on the overall effects of the experience on its participants, interfering with the organizers’ unprofessed goal of Christianity being established as the universal

religion for all, and toward more of a pluralistic response of respect and acceptance of the legitimacy of other world religions.

Not much happened with the Parliament for the next 95 years, but in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a reorganization of the vision and mission under the name of the Parliament of the World's Religions (PoWR) followed in 1993 by a centennial celebration gathering of world leaders, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa. This convening reignited the interest in interfaith cross-cultural relationship building and collaboration to address global issues which had been effectively put in place in 1893. According to its own website (2023), the PoWR is the largest effort of its kind in the world. Since the centennial celebration, there have been regular periodic Convenings, and now the PoWR is committed to not just interfaith gatherings every two years, but to important collaborative work in the world focused on “interfaith harmony, combating climate change, resisting hate and intolerance and promoting ethical religious literacy.” According to an article in *Religion and Politics*, “It (PoWR) is the closest thing we have to a progressive international faith movement” (Zubovich, 2018, para. 2).

### Mission and Vision

On its website, the Parliament of the World's Religions (PoWR) describes its mission in the following way: “...to cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world...in which:

·Religious and spiritual communities live in harmony and contribute to a better world from their riches of wisdom and compassion.



·Religious and cultural fears and hatreds are replaced with understanding and respect. People everywhere come to know and care for their neighbors.

·The richness of human and religious diversity is woven into the fabric of communal, civil, societal, and global life.

·The world's most powerful and influential institutions move beyond narrow self-interest to realize common good.

·The Earth and all life are cherished, protected, healed, and restored. All people commit to living out their highest values and aspirations.” (PoWR, *Our Mission*)

The work of the PoWR is focused on addressing the most threatening global issues of our time through building cross-cultural relationships characterized by “interfaith harmony, rather than unity” (PoWR, *Our Work*). Respect for and engagement with religious differences is the foundation on which their work in the world rests, and religious literacy is understood to be a very important part of this process. “Inter-religious harmony is an attainable and highly desirable goal...(and) respects and is enriched by the particularities of each tradition.” This goal is pursued through the establishment of relationships between different religious groups, the modeling of respect and engaged dialogue across cultural boundaries, and a focus on how a diverse but harmonized global interfaith community can address and solve some of the most critical issues facing our world today. These issues include climate change, peacebuilding and influencing more just societies, and advancing and protecting the rights of women, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups in the world. This mission is supported by their semi-annual interfaith convening, global programming, collaborations with similarly ideological organizations, and the establishment and promotion of a Global Ethic that reflects the

moral principles held by most religions in the world yet transcends any one faith tradition.

In 1993 at the centenary convening of Parliament in Chicago, the organizers discerned the shared ethical values of all religious traditions and outlined a set of universal core values in the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*. These ethical values include the golden rule which is found in almost every major world religion, the interdependence of human beings, individual responsibility for the care of life, humanity as one family, and a commitment to nonviolence. According to an announcement on the PoWR's website (2023), "At the 1993 Parliament in Chicago, the *Declaration Towards a Global Ethic* affirmed human rights as defined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations." The Global Ethic states:

After two world wars and the end of the cold war, the collapse of fascism and nazism, the shaking to the foundations of communism and colonialism, humanity has entered a new phase of its history. Today we possess sufficient economic, cultural, and spiritual resources to introduce... a vision of peoples living peacefully together, of ethnic and ethical groupings and of religions sharing responsibility for the care of Earth. A vision rests on hopes, goals, ideals, standards.... it is the communities of faith who bear a responsibility to demonstrate that such hopes, ideals, and standards can be guarded, grounded, and lived. (PoWR, *Announcing the Theme*)

### Religious Literacy Initiative

An important part of this vision of people living peacefully together rests on better knowledge and understanding of others' religions. Earlier this year, the PoWR partnered with Seattle University's Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement to develop and offer an online course in religious literacy. This course is designed "to increase awareness of the human quest for meaning across religious worldviews around the world" (Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement, 2023). Titled *Seeking*

*Religious Literacy*, this course is based on the belief held by both entities that seeking religious literacy is “an essential good in the world today.” This five-module course focuses on shared themes within the world’s major religions and includes first-hand accounts of experienced religion from those within each religious tradition. This new program does have a post-evaluation as part of its program design, so there may be some empirical data on the outcomes of this particular religious literacy initiative after a certain number of participants complete the program.

### Convenings

Beginning in the centennial year of the original World’s Parliament of Religions of 1893, the Parliament of the World’s Religions (PoWR) held its first Convening in the year 1993 in Chicago where the historic 1893 interfaith gathering occurred. Subsequent Convenings have been held in 1999 in Cape Town, in 2004 in Barcelona, in 2009 in Melbourne, in 2015 in Salt Lake City, in 2018 in Toronto, online as a virtual Convening in 2021, and back in Chicago in 2023. The Convenings have attracted more than 60,000 religious, spiritual, civic, and global/community leaders who have come together to explore how, through cross-cultural relationship building and collaborative problem solving, they can work together to address the world’s most pressing issues affecting the quality of life for people throughout the world. Leaders who have been a part of these Convenings include His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, UN Messenger of Peace Jane Goodall, Nobel Peace Laureates Desmond Tutu and Shirin Ebadi, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, President Jimmy Carter, and this year included American notables Richard Rohr, Marianne Williamson, and Cory Booker, among many others.

Each Convening has a central theme. In 2015 in Salt Lake City, Utah, the theme was titled *Reclaiming the Heart of Our Humanity: Working Together for a World of Compassion, Peace, Justice, and Sustainability*, and Jane Goodall gave a keynote address on Peace. In 2018 in Toronto, the theme was *The Promise of Inclusion, The Power of Love: Pursuing Global Understanding, Reconciliation, and Change*, and included Karen Armstrong and Rabbi David Rosen among over 2000 presenters. Over 10,000 people attended from over 80 countries, and the focus included a new emphasis on the dignity of women, the importance of collaborative climate action, and the honoring of indigenous peoples (Marshall, 2019). In her report on the experience of the 2018 Convening, Marshall (2019) said,

The Presence of indigenous representatives was a striking feature, as was large and active women’s participation. His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was a main speaker for the 2021 Convening which was held virtually because of the Covid pandemic and had the theme of *Opening Our Hearts to the World: Compassion in Action*. (p. 307)

The gathering was described by the Secretary-General of the King Abdullah bin Abdulazi International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) as having “attracted about 10,000 people from all over the world, representing various religious and cultural beliefs...to learn how to connect between different peoples and cultures, and to contribute to the increase and dissemination of understanding between followers of different religions and cultures around the world” (Saudi Press Agency, 2021, p. 1). The most recent Convening was held back in Chicago in August, 2023, and had a theme titled *A Call to Conscience: Defending Freedom and Human Rights*. Celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PoWR’s adoption of *Towards a Global Ethic*, Dr. Myriam Renaud (2023) shared this observation:

It was impressive to see how, thirty years on, the Parliament's 1993 document, *Towards a Global Ethic*, generated a lot of buzz during this year's convening. Whether in casual conversations or on social media, a lot of people talked about how, although most of us don't share the same beliefs, we agree on the basic values and principles expressed in the document. They appreciated how this clear statement can serve as a conversation starter and help people connect, whether they come from different religions or the same religion, or are not religious at all. (PoWR, *Our 2023 Convening*, para. 2)

Another practice which has become a part of the tradition of the Convenings is the Sikh offering of *langar*, a vegetarian meal served to all for free. This practice of *langar* is an important part of the Sikh faith tradition and is an over 500-year-old offering of free healthy meals to the hungry all over the world (PoWR, *Our 2023 Convening*, para. 1). Compassion shown to those in need is a common value of most if not all of the world's faith traditions, and seeing and experiencing this by those outside of the faith is an opportunity to move past stereotypes and connect on the level of common humanity. How Vivekananda would think of this, I do not know. But I imagine he would be pleased to see this once predominantly Christian nation embracing the theology and practices of other faith traditions as different pathways to realization of the One, a primary tenet of Vedanta.

## Global Programs

The Parliament of the World's Religions facilitates the respectful engagement of diverse religious leaders with one another, encouraging collaborative to address the important issues that our world is currently facing. According to its Website, it does this through the following myriad and intentional ways:

- Working to establish respectful and trusting relationships with each religious and spiritual community;

- Providing models for encounter, dialogue, and cooperation within and among religious and spiritual communities;
- Encouraging religious and spiritual communities to develop their own rationales for interfaith dialogue and cooperation, and their own addresses to the critical issues;
- Providing models for, and access to, creative engagement between religion and spirituality and other guiding institutions (e.g. government, business and commerce, education, media and the arts, science and medicine, and organizations of civil society);
- Bringing critical issues to the attention of religious and spiritual communities, along with thoughtful perspectives and up-to-date and reliable information;
- Assisting individual religious and spiritual communities, and “communities of communities” in developing their own visions of possible futures. (PoWR, *Our Work*, para.3)

The four main areas of focus of programming for the PoWR include advancing the vision of *Toward a Global Ethic*, climate action, peace and justice, indigenous peoples, women’s dignity, and engaging the next generation of change-makers (the mid-30s and younger), and helping them build the cross-cultural relationships now which will help in their future collaborate problem-solving (PoWR, *Next Generation*).

#### Toward a Global Ethic

Thirty years ago, a committee from the PoWR created a document called the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic which established guidelines for how our religiously and culturally diverse world can live together more peacefully. This Global Ethic is still a guiding vision for the Parliament and is perhaps the vision to which their religious literacy initiative as well as their regular convenings are intended to cultivate and support. According to Dr. Myriam Renaud (PoWR, *Our 2023 Convening*) in observing the presence of the ideals outlined in the Global Ethic:

It was impressive to see how, thirty years on, the Parliament's 1993 document, "Towards a Global Ethic," generated a lot of buzz during this year's convening. Whether in casual conversations or on social media, a lot of people talked about how, although most of us don't share the same beliefs, we agree on the basic values and principles expressed in the document. They appreciated how this clear statement can serve as a conversation-starter and help people connect, whether they come from different religions or the same religion, or are not religious at all." (para. 2)

### The Parliament: 1893 and Now

The Mission of the current Parliament of the World's Religions is a reflection not only of the vision of the organizers of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions to bring together diverse religious leaders from around the world but also of the impact Swami Vivekananda had on advancing an attitude of pluralism. Today, among interfaith leaders who want to work together to address world issues as exemplified by those engaged with the Convenings and Work of the PoWR, there is an emphasis on the importance of engaging others from diverse faith traditions with an attitude of respect, curiosity, and openness, what I am calling engaged religious pluralism. The Parliament of the World's Religions today is made up of much more religiously diverse leadership than the original Parliament of 1893, and seems to value religious literacy as a foundation for building relationships with those who are different from oneself. They use the term ethical religious literacy, implying an approach to learning about one another that is respectful and maintains the human dignity of all involved. In his address to the 2015 Parliament, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, "...we can only be a more united world through efforts like yours to reach out, find common ground, and work for shared solutions for our shared humanity" (U.S. Federal News Service, 2015).

## Chapter IV.

### Religious Literacy: What Difference Does It Make and How Do We Know?

There is a growing body of scholarly work in support of the emerging field of religious literacy, often a subfield of religious studies programs in higher education or part of K-12 curriculum. Religious literacy is also being encouraged for many professional fields including international relations, healthcare, business, law, and journalism, as well as for educators. In addition, religious literacy is emphasized as important for equipping a religiously diverse society such as the United States with the knowledge and skills necessary for effectively engaging in civil discourse and for building and maintaining a healthy democracy. The positive effects of religious literacy and the negative results of religious illiteracy are cited in most of this work, much of which has been referenced earlier in this paper. However, as Wolfart (2022) pointed out, there is little research-based, empirical evidence to date for supporting such claims.

### Limitations of Current Research

The first issue is that there is no consensus on the definition of religious literacy. The two main voices in the conversation have been Stephen Prothero and Diane Moore, and they have approached religious literacy very differently. Prothero has structured religious literacy around important knowledge that one will benefit from knowing about the world's major religions when living and working in such a religiously diverse nation as the United States. Moore has taken a more nuanced approach, emphasizing context



and the intimate and mutually-influencing relationship between religion and culture. Many other voices have entered the conversation with varying frameworks for understanding and defining religious literacy, but most are touting, as Prothero and Moore do, the benefits of religious literacy and the negative consequences of religious illiteracy.

With this growing body of work, the claims of earlier works are being cited as support for later claims, and many are reinforcing the assertions of each other. Religious illiteracy is said to contribute to prejudice, discrimination, bullying, marginalization, oppression, and overt physical violence, even genocide. While religious literacy is believed to increase respect, positive engagement, effective cross-cultural relationships, collaborative work, civic cohesion, a healthy democracy, and more effective international relations, and to decrease all of the forms of cultural, structural, and direct violence mentioned above.

According to the AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force (2010), “One of the most troubling and urgent consequences of religious illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism, thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful co-existence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas.” And Prothero (2007) believes that religious literacy will solve many personal and societal challenges, as evidenced in his following statement:

Those who master this dictionary [of religion-related terms] will be prepared to engage with the controversial social and political issues of our time. Closer to home, they will also be able to understand what is being said (and implied) in town meetings and school committees. And they will have the confidence to participate in conversations about religion among coworkers and friends. (p. 186)

The second issue is the lack of empirical evidence for these claims. Without strategically-designed methods for empirically measuring the impact of religious literacy, how do we know any of this to be true? And if we as researchers and scholars are going to design empirical research methods, which definition of religious literacy will be used, and what will it look like if achieved?

### Definition and Empirical Evidence

So, let's start with the first issue. What does it mean to be religiously literate? Does it mean that, like Vivekananda, one has enough knowledge and understanding of one's own religion as well as that of another with whom one is engaged in some type of meaningful work to accomplish objectives? Or, does it mean to have a comprehensive command of knowledge of many of the world's religious traditions? As the field of religious literacy is gaining traction and building its foundation, it may be moving toward a more unified understanding of what it means to be religiously literate. The AAR's Guidelines (2010) state that the religiously literate person will demonstrate:

A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices, and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical, and cultural contexts; and

The ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social, and cultural expressions across time and place. (p. 4)

According to Wolfart (2022), "For a growing number of participants in the conversation...religious literacy means promoting both knowledge – including religious knowledge – of self (heritage), as well as of multiple collective others (diversity)" (p. 413). If there is consensus building around what religious literacy means, even if the value is placed on contextual understanding, then perhaps we will see the advance of the

design of initiatives with established desired outcomes and defined means of measuring those outcomes.

Wolfart (2022) has asserted that internal competition in the field of religious literacy is interfering with movement toward a shared definition or shared research findings if they exist. In response to this lack of shared evidence-based research, Soules has advocated for the sharing of all findings as in the best interest of the overall field, the “rising tide lifts all boats” idea. Enstedt (2022) has raised the question of to what extent research is being or has been conducted, particularly in educational settings, without results being shared across the field. There may be existing evidence to support the claims of the benefits of religious literacy, but this evidence has not been shared.

In response to Wolfart’s reservations about the field where he even goes so far as to suggest that religious literacy may be self-serving to religious studies departments struggling for survival, Morgenstein-Fuerst (2022) said that

religious literacy is a framework deployed not for lofty goals of social betterment or a vague sense of liberation, but for survival; survival of academic programs and departments, survival of a body politic, and often the survival of individuals and groups who are targets of hate. (p. 435)

In her work, she has highlighted the privilege of religious illiteracy as reserved for the religious majority alone. Minority religious groups cannot afford to be religiously illiterate as their very survival may depend on their knowledge and understanding of the majority religion and the ways by which they interact with those of the dominant group. In her critique of Wolfart, Morgenstein-Fuerst (2022) said, “He does not account for how minoritized religions, religio-racial identities, or ethnicities fare within religious literacy. If we maintain a Christocentric view on religious literacy, we miss how people from minoritized religions rarely have the luxury of religious illiteracy” (p. 438). So, when

designing religious literacy programs, audience matters, and Moore’s emphasis on situated knowledge becomes even more relevant. Who is the program for, and what are the desired outcomes?

An early contribution to the field of such research has been submitted by a collaborative team of researchers in Finland, Germany, and Sweden. Schnauffer et al. (2023) looked to develop a research tool for assessing religious knowledge as a component of religious literacy; they see this as a starting point for filling in the deficit of empirical data for informing the prevalent and myriad discussions on the topic. A questionnaire for 15-year-old students was designed to assess religious knowledge and understanding, with the hopes of creating an instrument with international validity. Using the AAR’s definition of religious literacy, which was developed by Diane Moore, these researchers believe that “researching religious knowledge empirically...is a promising beginning for researching religious literacy” (p. 229), where context will matter and eventually be a part of a valid research instrument. Their interest in such a tool “is to inform research and practice concerning the status of pupils’ actual religious literacy as a basis for RE that has the potential of expanding their knowledge and their abilities to live peacefully in a multicultural and multi-religious society” (p. 227).

#### The Aspen Institute’s Religion and Society Initiative

The Aspen Institute’s Religion and Society Initiative has published both *The Imperative for Religious Literacy Evaluation: Context, Key Insights, and Recommendations* (Soules, 2023) as well as *A Guidebook for Religious Literacy Evaluation: Resources for Planning and Design* (Soules, 2023). In its work in this field, The Aspen Institute and Soules (2023) have advocated for religious literacy as a

proactive approach to pluralism and make similar claims as others about the benefits of religious literacy to healthy societies as well as the negative consequences of religious illiteracy (*The Imperative for Religious Literacy*, p. 2). To combat prejudice, intolerance, bigotry, and racism, religious literacy is understood as a means of easing conflicts in pluralistic societies, which are increasingly becoming most countries in the world. In this work, Soules (2023) has reinforced the importance of religious literacy but has taken a step further by advocating for and creating a framework for empirical assessment of outcomes. Soules (2023) has made direct claims about the need for research, saying “in order to clearly demonstrate the link between religious literacy education programs and these desired, outcomes, we must collect and share data, perform meta-analyses, and generally make evaluation practices commonplace across the field of religious literacy” (*The Imperative for Religious Literacy*, p. 3).

### Proposed Model for Program and Evaluation Design

Aspen’s Initiative advocates for the establishment of solid baseline research in order to measure growth or progress in the field of religious literacy. Then, learning goals and design evaluations can be established for specific programs. Soules (2023) has emphasized, “There is so little research; any shared evaluation findings in this field contribute meaningfully to other practitioners, researchers, and funders who are interested in supporting this work (*The Imperative for Religious Literacy*, p. 12). An evaluation framework suggested by Soules (2023) in *A Guidebook for Religious Literacy Education* would include six steps and a number of key questions as outlined in the following framework:

1. Establish a baseline and engage stakeholders

2. Describe the program & define the evaluation
3. Design the evaluation
4. Gather and analyze data
5. Develop conclusions based on analysis of data
6. Share and apply lessons learned. (p. 1)

Step 1 - Establish a Baseline and Engage Stakeholders. Identify important resources and define evaluation priorities and standards. Determine who will be involved in the operations of the program, those served by the program, and who will be impacted by the evaluation of the program.

Step 2 - Describe the Program and Define the Evaluation. Identify the components of the program and intended outcomes. Define religious literacy as it relates to a specific context (Figure 2). According to Soules (2023), “There is rarely a direct line between program activities and the types of outcomes often cited in arguments for religious literacy” (*A Guidebook*, p. 6). Focusing on short-term objectives, but including intermediate and long-term indirect impacts is recommended (Figure 3). Identifying evaluation questions can include both process evaluation as well as impact evaluation questions. Before beginning this process, however, a needs assessment may be prudent. Key questions to consider when designing the program, according to Soules (2023) and defining the evaluation include:

1. What does religious literacy mean in a particular context?
2. What will it look like if achieved?
3. What will the program/instruction entail?
4. What types of evidence will answer evaluation questions?
5. How will results be measured?
6. How will longer-term results be measured?
7. How will the results be validated? (*A Guidebook*, p. 9)

Step 3 - Design the Evaluation. What data will be collected, by what method, and when?

How can outcomes be evaluated? Baseline evaluations to assess pre-program knowledge,

skills, and attitudes are important for determining the impact of the program which will be assessed through post-program evaluation. Common methods for data collection include surveys, interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and analysis of artifacts and documents (Figure 4). It is important to make sure the evaluation design is realistic given the resources and time available for this phase. Key questions to consider when designing evaluations include:

1. What types of evidence will answer your evaluation questions?
2. How much time do you have for evaluations and what resources will you commit to this phase?
3. Are the questions used for evaluation appropriate for data collected?
4. Is the evaluation design compatible with the program design?
5. Are the people delivering the program involved in the evaluation design?
6. If evaluating intermediate- and long-term impact, are participants in the program willing to be involved after initial evaluation? (*A Guidebook*, pp. 10-13)

Step 4 - Gather and Analyze Data. The method of collecting and analyzing data will be based on program design and evaluation method. Data collection needs to be built into program planning, with thought about how much data is the right amount for this specific program evaluation. Collecting data anonymously tends to yield more honest and accurate results. Keep data organized and secure. Inform participants of follow-up plans and have a system for maintaining accurate contact information, if appropriate. Make sure the plan for data analysis is designed and understood before data collection.

Step 5 - Develop Conclusions Based on Analysis of Data. The design and length of the program as well as the evaluation design and questions will impact the types of conclusions that can be drawn. The results from a shorter program will probably not be as significant as a longer-term program, and a small sample size will not be as quantifiably

reliable as a larger number of participants. Be aware of bias and try to minimize the impact of bias during evaluation design; try to have different people evaluating and analyzing from those conducting the program. Keep in mind that many external factors can affect outcomes; avoid overstating findings and acknowledge the limitations of the evaluation. Key questions to consider in this step according to Soules (2023) include:

1. What does this evaluation say about religious literacy in this context?
2. Were there any surprises in what was found?
3. Were any of the assumptions confirmed?
4. What is this evaluation unable to say?
5. What were the limitations of the evaluation?
6. How well were you able to answer your evaluation questions?
7. What new questions have come up during the analysis? (*A Guidebook*, p. 15)

Step 6 - Share and Apply Lessons Learned. Sharing results internally will help the organization improve future programming, and externally will help advance the field of religious literacy by adding to the body of empirical research related to religious literacy and its outcomes which can help everyone involved in this field to design better religious literacy programs which do have an impact on desired outcomes (Figure 5).



## Chapter V.

### A Path Forward

As I write this, fighting has erupted again in the Middle East. Hamas orchestrated a surprise air and ground attack against Israel and now Israel is responding with strategic strikes into the Gaza Strip while preparing for a massive ground offensive. I think about the revenge – counter revenge cycle referred to earlier, and what this sets the next generations up for in their relations with one another. I empathize with the Jewish people who, after the Diaspora, have faced much antisemitism in the countries where they settled and built their lives, the most horrific of this prejudice exemplified by the over six million Jews who perished during the Holocaust. I empathize with the Palestinians who had parts of their land taken away by Western imperialist powers for the creation of the State of Israel, have lost more land as Israel has made illegal expansions into their territory, and have endured decades of oppression and dehumanizing unequal human rights. In response to this current conflict, Harvard Divinity School’s Religion and Public Life (2023) faculty released the following statement:

“The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.”

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “Danger of a Single Story” TEDGlobal, July 2009

Start with the rockets fired into Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023 and not with the illegal occupation of Palestinian land by Israel and the

blockade of Gaza since 2007, and you have an entirely different story.

We are horrified by what is unfolding in Palestine/Israel. We recognize the pain, loss, and humanity of Palestinians and Israelis and are in touch with family, friends, and colleagues in the region as we are able. There is still so much that is unknown and unfolding.

What we do know is that single story narratives are dangerous. To acknowledge the context out of which this latest spate of violence arises is not to diminish the pain and suffering of Israeli and Palestinian victims. We agree with UN special rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories Francesca Albanese who is “shocked and appalled” by the violence unfolding in the region *and* “horrified by the narrative, by the discourse, because it is possible, and necessary, to stand both with the Palestinians and the Israelis without resorting to ethical relativism, to selective outrage or worse, calls for violence.” Albanese calls for the international community to be “wise and even-handed” when confronting the result of “decades of oppression imposed on the Palestinians...”

When these “decades of oppression” are left out of the story about Hamas’ horrendous attack on Israeli civilians, a narrative about an “innocent” state of Israel’s right to “defend” itself against supposedly “unprovoked” aggression is legitimized. The reality is much more complex, and that complexity must be confronted if there is any chance to avoid endless cycles of dehumanization, destruction, and death.

In this time of sorrow and pain, may we all challenge single story narratives that justify vengeance and retaliation. Pathways out of the catastrophic events in Palestine/Israel and regionally cannot be military ones but must involve diplomacy, historical accountability, dismantling the structures of violence, and retraining the political imagination to disrupt exclusionary and ethnocentric conceptions of belonging. May we be mindful of each other at this moment. May we put into practice all we have learned and the values we hold dear as we continue to pursue a just world at peace. (personal communication, 9 October 2023)

The salient point made here is that a single story is dangerous, that if we are ever to achieve world peace it will come after some real work at expanding our world views to include those of others. Part of this message is that our narratives can start wherever it is beneficial to us to start them in service to our own goals and agendas. But, to really understand any world issue such as the Middle Eastern conflict, one needs to contextualize any specific action within the largest possible story one can uncover, and

work to expand one's lens to include many perspectives. So, how does religious literacy fit into this conflicted world context? What positive role can it play, if any? This is what I have been working to discern with this thesis project.

### Overview of What Was Done/Hypothesis

I began this project with a bias of belief in the power of religious literacy to really make a difference in establishing conditions in our relationships with those different from ourselves that would foster deeper cross-cultural relationships, more positive collaborative work to address our local and global issues, and to ultimately be a positive force impacting peace initiatives in the world. My goal was to find evidence of this belief. Because of the increasing references I was seeing to this topic of religious literacy, I expected there to be a body of literature with research-based data supporting positive outcomes of religious literacy programming and initiatives.

I did a deep dive into myriad scholarly search engines over the course of several years, looking for any books, peer-reviewed scholarly articles, dissertations, or theses related to this topic. Initially, I found many sources touting the positive benefits of religious literacy, real or potential, and linking religious illiteracy to many of the societal problems we are facing in many countries throughout the world as our societies become increasingly diverse. I included sources discussing the expansions of religious literacy initiatives within educational institutions and across many professional fields. But I kept searching for empirical support for these claims and began to realize that maybe it was not there...yet. I began to flounder a bit, not knowing exactly where to go with this project, but I kept searching.

Some criticism of the emerging field of religious literacy began to emerge with Wolfart's (2022) article which highlighted the lack of evidence to support the lofty claims being made, repeated, and reinforced from within by the leading voices in the conversation. There were multiple responses to his criticism, including those by Enstedt (2022) and Morgenstein-Fuerst (2022), expressing support for the claims of the benefits of religious literacy but also supporting the need for empirical research to support these claims. I then found a collaborative study done by researchers in Finland, Germany, and Sweden who identified a lack of empirical basis for the claims being made in the field of religious literacy, but who also successfully developed a research tool for investigating religious knowledge as part of religious literacy as a starting point for building this basis (Schnauffer et al., 2023). All of this was discussed in Chapter IV.

The most recent addition to this conversation was made by the Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Program's publishing of both *The Imperative for Religious Literacy Evaluation* (Soules, 2023) and *A Guidebook for Religious Literacy Evaluation* (Soules, 2023). As outlined in Chapter IV, these resources propose a possible method for designing religious literacy programs with subsequent evaluation in mind. Most of us in this field of religious literacy have a conviction that religious literacy, whether defined as knowledge of one's own as well as others' religious traditions or in a broader sense understanding the inter-influence of many dimensions of religion and society, can be a positive force in our communities, societies, and in the world. Many of us have anecdotal evidence of such. But, until we can empirically support these claims, they are open to intense scrutiny and doubt. The path forward must include research-based evidence of the results of strategically designed religious literacy initiatives that have been crafted

simultaneously alongside evaluation frameworks. I hope to be a part of the group of academics who help to develop this empirical support for what I believe about religious literacy efforts based on anecdotal evidence from courses I currently teach.

### Conclusion

Growing up, my household was surrounded by diverse populations of Hindus and Christians, which allowed me to experience different cultures and perspectives while maintaining my Muslim upbringing. Within our community, we were instilled with the value of not judging individuals based on their religious beliefs. As a result, we embraced the diversity of our community...But as I learned more about the conflict between each religion, things started to change. I learned that my country Bangladesh and my neighboring country, India, have been fighting over religion for decades. I was horrified to see how hundreds of innocent people are losing their lives due to religious conflicts which began to drive me further and further away from religion...I began to believe that there are so many wars and unending suffering because of religion. But this course has altered my perspective on religion, and I've begun to learn to respect both my own and other people's faiths.

I am grateful for taking this course as it has taught me valuable life lessons and how to view the world with kindness and empathy. Empathy is a crucial skill for healthcare providers as it allows them to take a human-centered approach and provide care with dignity, respect, and kindness. As I pursue a career in the medical field, empathy will help me connect with patients on a deeper level, resulting in improved patient outcomes and overall satisfaction. (personal communication, 2023, May 2)

This is just one quote from the emails I have received from students who have taken one of the courses I teach. I have received many similar to this over the years. Many of us interested in the impact of religious literacy have a belief in how it can change one's worldview in expansive ways and therefore motivate engaged pluralism which can have very positive effects on relationship building, community building, and peace building. A desire to engage with others supported by a better understanding of the worldview of others *seems* like it would motivate more effective cross-cultural relationship building and ultimately more collaborative problem-solving of some of the

most serious issues facing our world. Many of us have anecdotal support for such claims, but that is only an unstable foundation for building a new field, or subfield of the academic or theological study of religion. Beginning to establish a body of empirically-based research will help develop the field of religious literacy by clarifying needs, informing its claims and the designs of its programs, and building support for its initiatives. Research design and findings need to be shared across stakeholders so advancements can be made more quickly. As has been advocated by others, scholars and program leaders need to avoid the tendency toward competition and instead work themselves to create a more collaborative approach to building this field together (Enstedt, 2022; Lester, 2022; Morgenstein-Fuerst, 2022; Schnauffer, et al., 2023; Soules, 2023). A rising field can lift all engaged professionals.

As Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said when he addressed the Parliament of the World's Religions' 2015 Convening:

We are living through a time of turbulence, tension, and transition. Societies are more diverse, but intolerance is on the rise. We see growing and violent extremism, radicalism, and widening conflicts that are characterized by a fundamental disregard for human life. We see heightened hostility and discrimination towards people crossing borders in search of safety or opportunities denied to them at home. Hate crimes and other forms of intolerance mar too many communities, often stoked by irresponsible leaders seeking political gain... We are a more connected world... But we can only be a more united world through efforts like yours to reach out, find common ground, and work for shared solutions for our shared humanity. (U.S. Fed News Service, 2015)

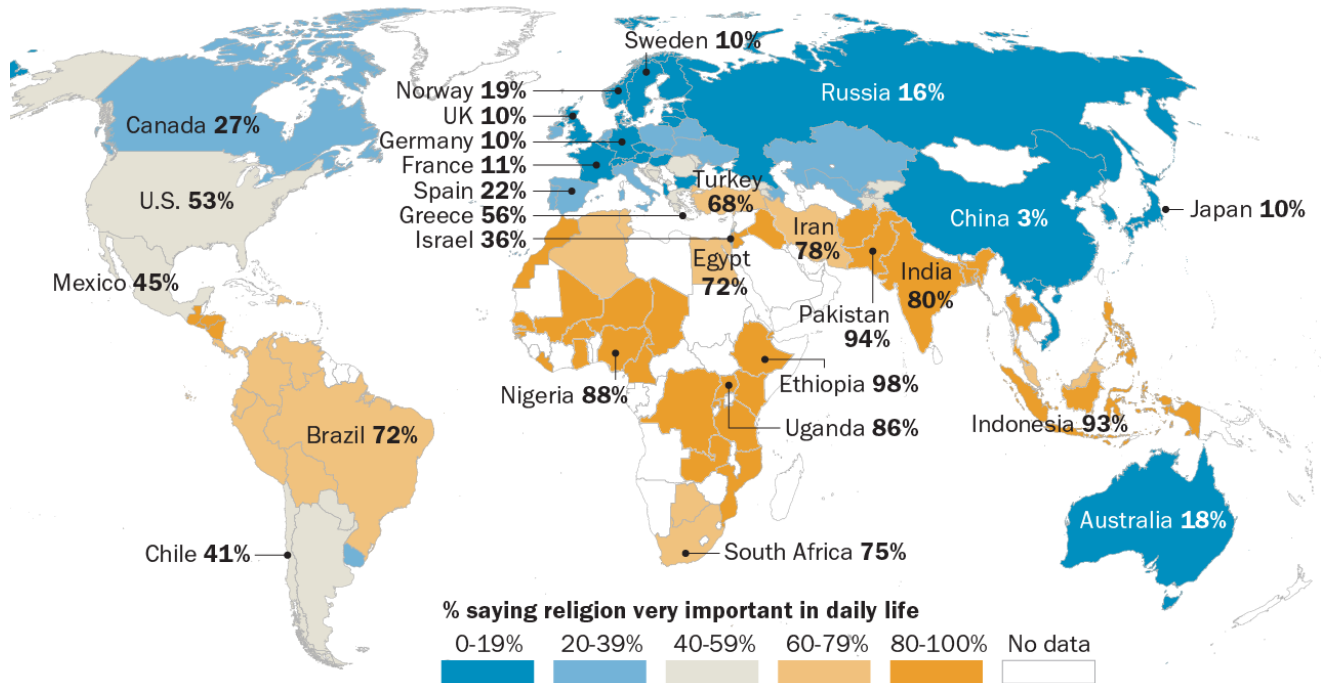
While religious literacy is not the solution to these major world issues in and of itself, it has the potential to positively impact conditions in which the other steps toward establishing justice and peace in the world are possible. With religious identity as one of the primary identity markers of current times, increasing knowledge and understanding of

others' religions, having a better awareness of one's own worldview and bias, and motivating engagement in respectful and collaborative ways with others in order to address issues both locally and globally can all be steps toward the vision of a just world at peace. As demonstrated by Swami Vivekananda in 1893, having some knowledge of others' religions and being able to use relatable language and reference points because of this knowledge can greatly enhance one's ability to build cooperative relationships and to be influential and persuasive toward desired outcomes. Imagine world leaders coming together to solve the climate crisis or the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Imagine the motivation to collaborate and find shared solutions rather than to "win" at the expense of the other. Imagine the perfection of the world being restored, which is part of the mythology of many world religions, indicating a universal human desire for such a world. Can religious literacy make a difference? I propose that we work together as a field of professionals to find out.

Figures.

## Religion is very important to people in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America

*% who say religion is very important in their lives*



"The Age Gap in Religion Around the World"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1 – Importance of Religion to Peoples of the World (Pew, 2015)



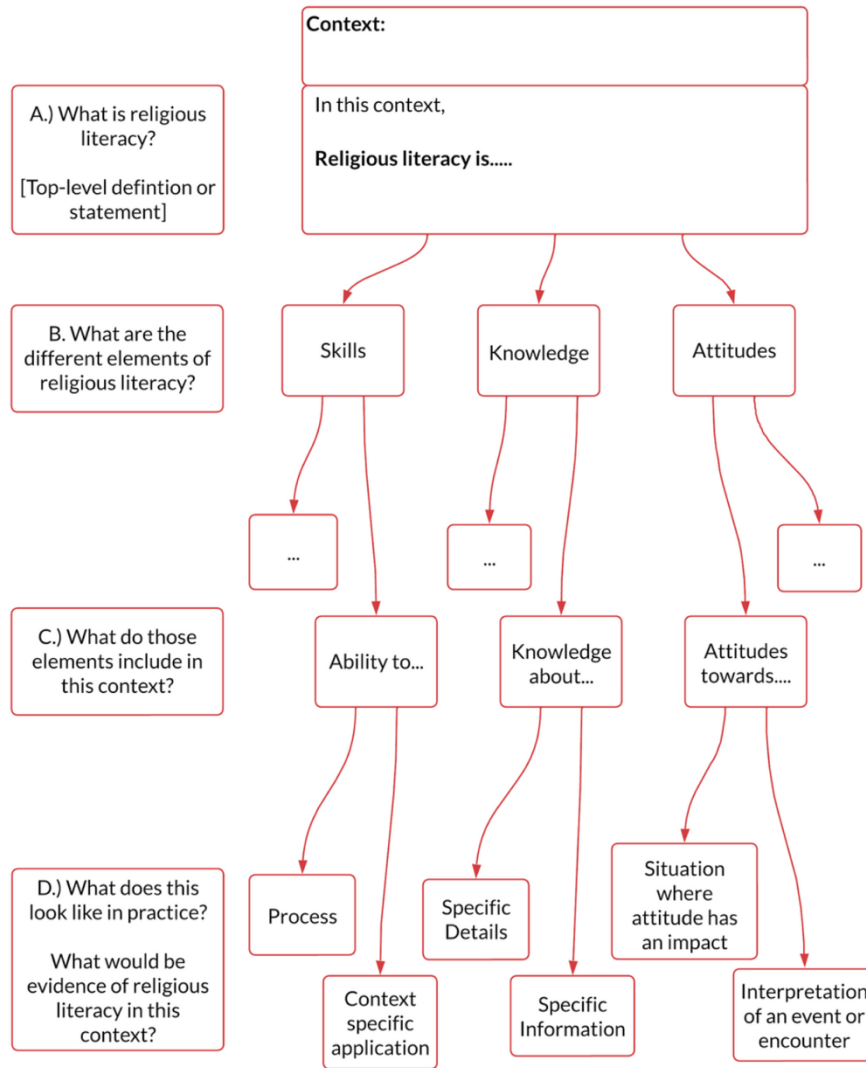


Figure 2 – Defining Contextualized Religious Literacy (Soules, *A Guidebook*, p. 4)

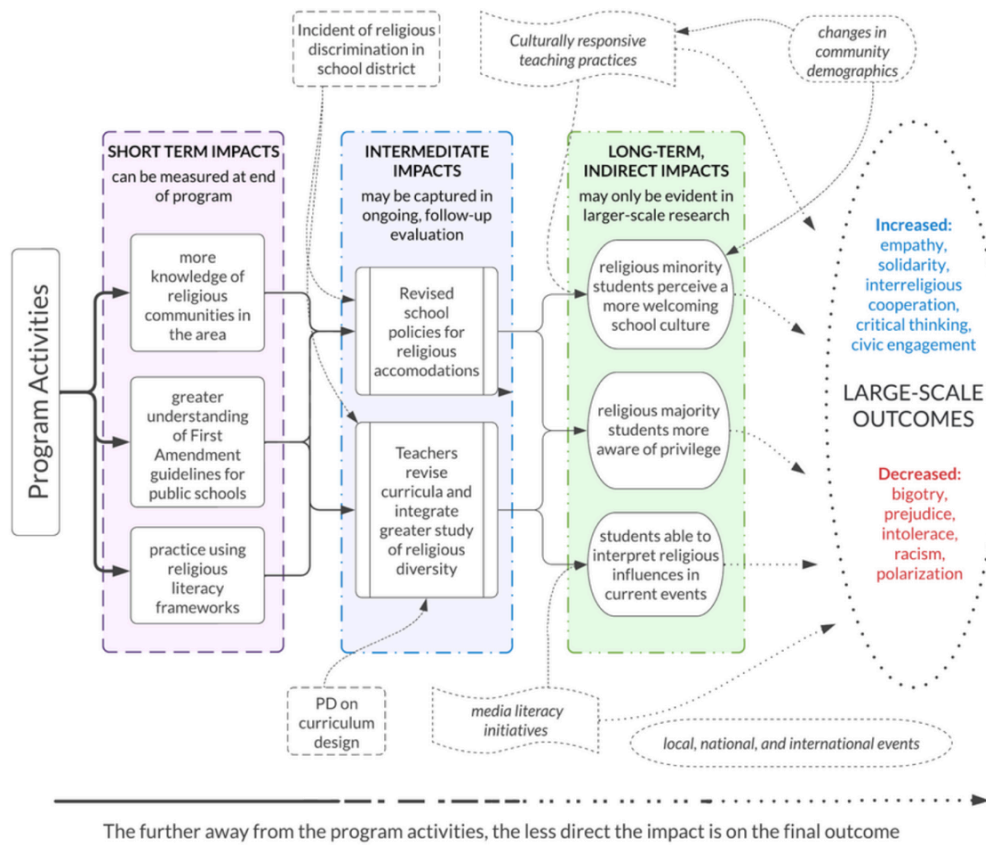


Figure 3 – Planning for Short-, Intermediate-, and Long-Term Impacts (Soules, *A Guidebook*, p. 6)

An Evaluation Framework

Common Methods of Data Collection		
Method	Benefits	Drawbacks
Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be simple to administer, especially to large numbers</li> <li>• Can provide quantitative data</li> <li>• Anonymous responses</li> <li>• Repeatable across multiple sessions of a program</li> <li>• Collects multiple types of information (opinion, demographics, behaviors)</li> <li>• Easy to summarize data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only get answers to the questions you ask</li> <li>• Scope of data can be limited,</li> <li>• Easy to misinterpret results (especially with small samples)</li> <li>• Requires appropriate administration and analysis tools</li> <li>• Cannot ask for clarification on answers</li> <li>• Survey fatigue</li> <li>• Low response-rates on follow-up surveys</li> </ul>
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only get answers to the questions you ask</li> <li>• Scope of data can be limited,</li> <li>• Easy to misinterpret results (especially with small samples)</li> <li>• Requires appropriate administration and analysis tools</li> <li>• Cannot ask for clarification on answers</li> <li>• Survey fatigue</li> <li>• Low response-rates on follow-up surveys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very time consuming</li> <li>• Hard to analyze</li> <li>• Lack of confidentiality</li> <li>• Can be influenced by interviewer</li> <li>• Hard to quantify results</li> <li>• Cannot reach as many people</li> </ul>
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficient for reaching multiple people</li> <li>• Group members generate ideas together</li> <li>• Can lead to unexpected topics</li> <li>• Can ask for clarification</li> <li>• Can observe tone and non-verbal cues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be time consuming</li> <li>• Harder to analyze</li> <li>• Some participants may be influenced by others in group</li> <li>• Lack of confidentiality</li> <li>• Hard to quantify results</li> </ul>
Participant Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can account for the impacts of an unexpected elements of a program (i.e. a disruption during an activity)</li> <li>• Does not require any additional input from participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants can be influenced if they know they are being observed</li> <li>• Not as effective for large groups or settings</li> <li>• Cannot capture attitudes or opinions of participants</li> </ul>
Analysis of Artifacts or Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not require additional time from participants</li> <li>• Is not time-dependent (i.e. the document will be the same next week)</li> <li>• Easy to track changes over time</li> <li>• Can be anonymous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time consuming</li> <li>• Not all documents are publicly available</li> <li>• Cannot ask for clarification</li> <li>• Can be incomplete or lack important context</li> </ul>

Figure 4 – Possible Methods of Data Collection (Soules, *A Guidebook*, p. 11)

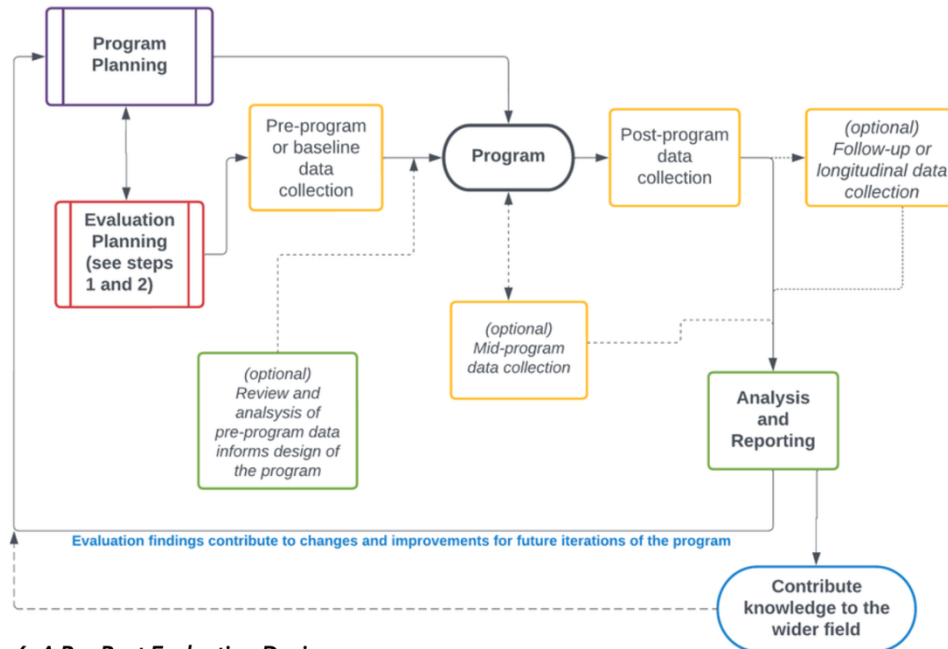


Figure 5 – Pre- and Post-Evaluation Design (Soules, *A Guidebook*, p. 10)

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